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The Holy Knight's DARK ROAD

3



“Sain.”

She looked directly into his eyes.

**“None of us here
thinks you’re weak.
Not anymore.”**

The Holy Knight's DARK ROAD



“U-Uh
well, it um...
It looks very
good on her.”

“Come on, Sain,
don't you have any
comments to offer?”

**Alicia
Remia**

She is a beautiful girl who
commands a special power
known as holy fire.
The festivities have her
extra excited.

**Sain
Fostess**

He is a boy who,
despite being the strongest
holy knight in history, strives to
become the dark knight. His
heart is aflutter at seeing
Melia in something other
than a maid uniform.

“...His reactions
are way too easy
to read.”

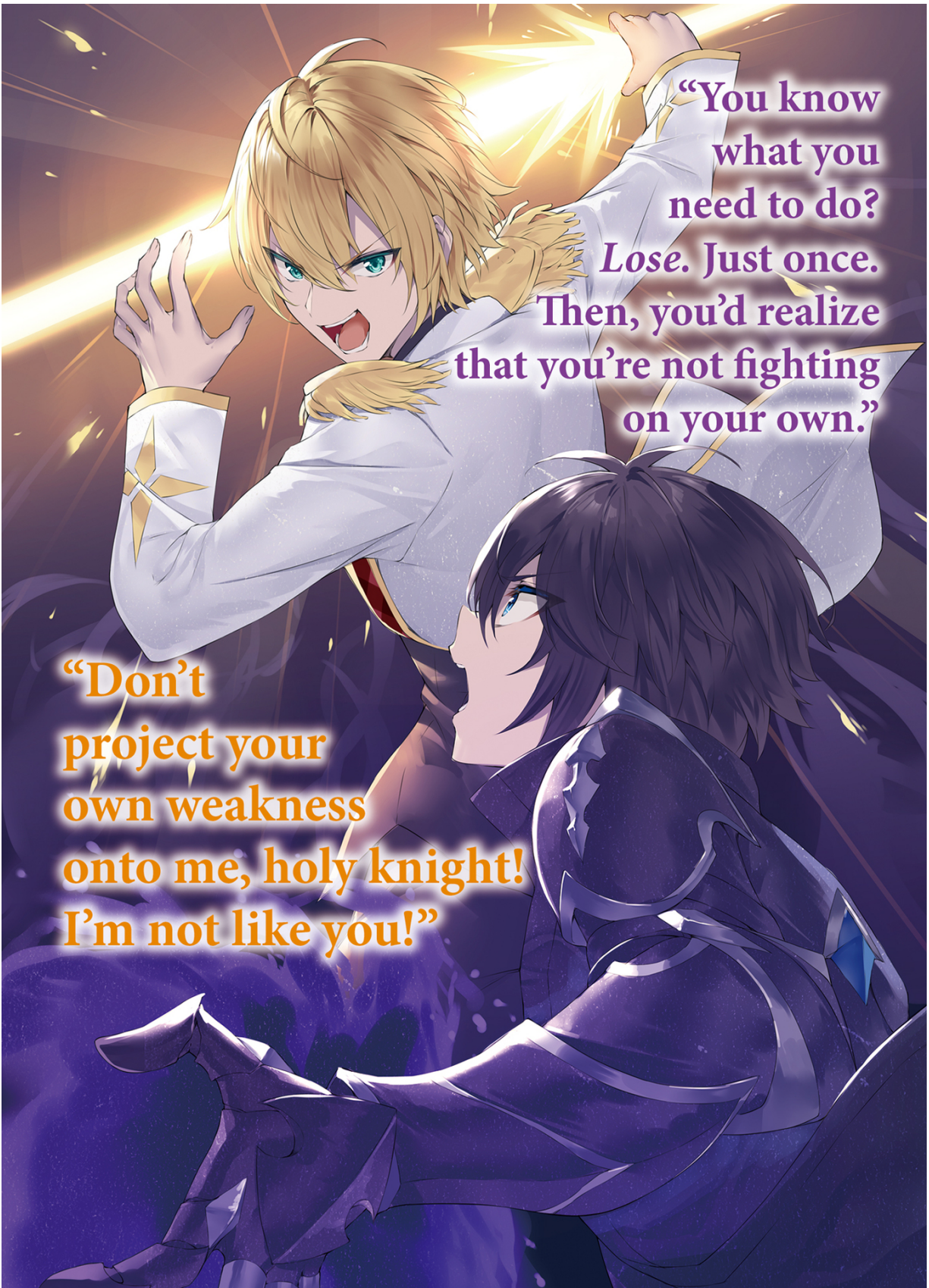
Marni

She is a beautiful
dark elf girl whose race
faces rampant discrimination.
Due to the festivities
drawing a large crowd,
she generally keeps
her hood up.

“Um...
Are you really
sure I look good
in this?”

Melia

She is Sain's personal maid.
She normally wears a maid
uniform, but this being
a festival, she was
convinced to try on
something new.



“You know
what you
need to do?
Lose. Just once.
Then, you’d realize
that you’re not fighting
on your own.”

“Don’t
project your
own weakness
onto me, holy knight!
I’m not like you!”

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1: Battle Expo](#)

[Chapter 2: A Moment of Rest](#)

[Chapter 3: Of Fates and Holy Knights](#)

[Chapter 4: Friends](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Afterword](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)

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Prologue

Halfway through July, three months after enrolling in Jenifa Royal Magic Academy, Sain stood in a densely packed auditorium. The weather was warming up, and many of his classmates had changed into summer uniforms, but he still wore the same getup as always.

“Well, this is one of those moments when I’m reminded that Jenifa really is the largest school in the kingdom...” said Sain, who happened to be standing in the middle of the large hall. He looked around in a circle.

“There are so many students here.”

“Yeah, and this isn’t all of them. They can’t fit everyone into the auditorium, so they split us into three groups,” Alicia added.

The entire student body was here today for a school assembly. It wasn’t just Sain’s intermediate division; students from the junior and senior divisions were present as well.

“I see the student council president is going to be speaking today,” said Melia as she looked over at the people standing on the stage.

Marni nodded.

“A rare sight.”

Every so often, Jenifa students would be told to gather for a school assembly, where concerns or notices pertaining to all divisions would be brought to their attention. While such announcements were usually made by the headmaster and his staff, the presence of the president on the stage this time suggested that there was something more. With his neat blond hair and sharp gaze, the president immediately became the center of attention as he stepped forward to speak.

“I am your student council president, Cain Theresia. As many of you already know, the magic battle exposition for students of the intermediate division will begin next week,” he said, his voice carrying clearly through the expansive space of the auditorium. “The intermediate division did, of course, partake in their field studies only last month. Keep in mind, however, that the battle expo is an event of incomparably greater scale and significance. Many guests unaffiliated with the academy will be present. It

may prove difficult to perform to your full potential in the presence of spectators, but for those who wish to make connections in the outside world, know that this will be an invaluable opportunity to make an impression.”

As one would expect from the intensely meritocratic Jenifa Royal Magic Academy, many of its students already knew what they wanted to do in the future and were pursuing their own goals. Some examples included Sain, who was striving to become the dark knight, and Alicia’s friend, Cisca, who was well on her way to becoming an experienced blacksmith. For students who had a clear vision of their future, building connections with those outside the school was a crucial way of getting ahead.

“Registration closes this weekend. We already have over twenty participants, but we’re still looking for more. I hope to see an enthusiastic turnout.”

With that, Cain concluded his speech and stepped back, but not before shooting a pointed glance in Sain’s direction.

“The student council president, huh...” Sain whispered to himself as he watched Cain turn and leave the stage. For a moment, he wondered if he was being too self-conscious, but he soon dismissed the idea. He knew what he saw; Cain’s glare was directed at him.

He turned his thoughts inward, replaying the incident from last month in his mind. He recalled how Cain Theresia had defeated numerous entities of Chaos without even breaking a sweat, and he did it while — for some inexplicable reason — exuding what seemed like a burning hatred for the holy knight. There was no question that the student council president was not a normal student. Somehow, he had to be connected to the holy knight.

Sain was roused from his musing when the assembly ended and students began returning to their classrooms.

“Sain, are you entering the battle expo?” asked Alicia as they filed out of the auditorium.

“Of course!” he answered with his usual zest. “After the field studies last month, I kept training, and I’ve added a few more dark magic spells to my repertoire. The best way to test them out is in direct combat. The battle expo is all one-on-one fights between students, right?”

“Yeah, it’s a tournament, and each match is a duel between two students. Unlike the field studies, there’s no survival element. It’s a test of pure skill... Win or lose, it’s all decided in the ring.”

“Mmhmhm, I can feel the darkness growing restless inside me. It wishes to be free. The day of the tournament shall be when I unleash its power—”

“Yeah, yeah, and humiliate yourself in front of hundreds of people. We all know how this goes already.”

“Rude!” he exclaimed indignantly.

She was definitely being rude. She might also be correct, but he wasn’t about to admit that in front of her.

“Master Sain, you haven’t registered yet, have you?” Melia asked.

“No, I haven’t, and I might as well go do that now, since we still have some time before the next class starts.”

Sain made his way toward the intermediate division’s school building where, since the week before, a registration desk for the battle expo had been set up on the first floor. As he walked, he glanced at Melia, who was matching his pace.

“So... I guess I’m the only one who’s going to be entering?”

“Actually, I was thinking of giving it a go, myself.”

“Really? The battle expo?” He gave his maid a surprised look. “This isn’t the kind of thing you’re usually interested in.”

“True, but I’m a student now, so I figured I should do some student things. Try new experiences, broaden my horizons, stuff like that... Also, it’d be *hilarious* if you end up facing me in the tournament.”

“Hah, yeah, that’d be hila— Wait a minute. What *are* you going to do if that happens?”

“Beat you to a pulp and officially reverse our relationship?”

Melia smiled innocently, while Sain visibly paled. Having spent so many years together, he was well aware of how strong she was. If his opponent was Alicia or Marni, he might sneak in a win if he managed to catch them by surprise. Against Melia, though, there would be no surprises. There would only be a swift, brutal beatdown. He wouldn’t even land a hit on her.

Training... I need more training...

The prospect of getting his ass kicked by his own attendant in front of a massive audience was too much even for him to bear.

“I think... I’ll pass,” Marni said softly.

“Miss Grim? How come? With your skills, you almost certainly have a decent shot at winning the whole thing.”

“Skills or not, I don’t like having so many eyes on me...”

Sain winced at her reply. The field exercises last month had changed something in Marni. Since then, she hadn’t worn her cloak at school. In other words, she’d stopped hiding her unmistakably dark elven traits — silver hair and long ears. He’d hoped the trend would continue, but the battle expo was admittedly a different matter. There would be numerous outside guests present, and while not all of them would be overtly hostile to dark elves, she’d nevertheless have to contend with plenty of malice. Either way, for someone who’d spent a good chunk of her life avoiding attention as much as possible, it was unlikely that she’d perform well in a full arena.

In fact, Sain grudgingly accepted, she’s probably better off not participating.

“In that case, I’ll sit this one out, too,” said Alicia. “I don’t want Marni to feel like she’s being left out. Also, at least one of the holy knight’s attendants should probably be on standby.”

“Hm.” Sain crossed his arms contemplatively. “You have a point. It’s true that Chaos has been showing up more often lately...”

It wasn’t just the onslaught during the field exercises, either. Even afterwards, Chaos had appeared multiple times near the academy. Each time, they’d fended off the invaders without much trouble, but the sheer frequency with which they were showing up was concerning. Ensuring continued vigilance during school events was probably a good idea.

“If it’s Chaos we’re worried about, why don’t I handle patrol duty instead of Miss Alicia—”

“It’s okay, just go. Don’t worry about me. These kinds of events don’t happen every day, so you should take advantage of the opportunity. I’ve already experienced something like this back in my junior days, so I won’t be missing much. Besides, the battle expo is as much a festival as it is a tournament, so there’s plenty of fun to be had as a spectator, too. A lot of vendors will be setting up booths,” said Alicia.

Alicia’s encouragement elicited a reluctant nod from Melia, who still seemed to feel a little guilty. Sain, for his part, was glad that his maid was participating, and he mouthed a word of thanks in Alicia’s direction. As his attendant, Melia had been working for him since a tender age, and she’d never had the chance to just be a normal girl, never mind participating in school events.

“You... don’t really have to worry about me. I won’t feel left out,” Marni said, glancing at Alicia but quickly turning away to avoid meeting her gaze.

“Says the one who hides in the library tower whenever she’s by herself.” Alicia smirked. “It’s fine. Come with me and I’ll show you around. We’ll enjoy the tournament our own way.”

“...If you say so.”

Marni’s tone remained reserved, but a hint of a smile flashed across her lips. She didn’t show it, but she was probably looking forward to the battle expo, as well.

“Of course, I’ll keep an eye out for Chaos, too,” said Sain. “If I’m in the middle of a match and things really go south, I can just forfeit and run over. Plus, the holy knight’s power lets me instantly recover from wounds and fatigue.”

Alicia lifted an eyebrow.

“Huh. That’s convenient. Does that work for us attendants, too?”

“You can’t do it yourselves. As your master, I can make a conscious effort to push my power into you... but, unfortunately, doing that puts a lot of stress on your body. In fact, the recovery I just mentioned isn’t technically recovery; it’s using the Goddess’s power as a replacement for my own stamina. That’s fine for me, because I’m the holy knight and I’m attuned to accepting her blessings, but attendants aren’t fully attuned, and the excess power ends up stressing your bodies.”

That was why, if he was being honest, he much preferred for his attendants to stand by with their hands free.

“All right, I get you.” Alicia nodded, satisfied by his explanation. “You know, I’m actually starting to get used to this whole moonlighting as the holy knight’s attendant thing.”

Recently, she’d been living two different lives simultaneously. On one hand, she was a student enjoying a peaceful school routine; on the other, she was also an attendant of the holy knight, and had to leap into action at a moment’s notice when Chaos appeared. Even Marni had been helping them fend off Chaos lately, meaning that all four of them were currently wearing more hats than just those of a student.

“Sorry to be making you do this.”

“It’s fine. I’m doing it because I want to.”

Alicia smiled at him, and he felt a little better. He continued in a serious tone, however.

"Still, I'd like you to prioritize your student life. I know it's hard, but it's important. This... *thing* that we're doing behind the scenes... It's not normal, and there's no need for it to be. Don't focus too much on it. If you let it get to you, sooner or later, you'll start falling apart."

"...All right. Point taken," Alicia said with a nod.

"He says that," Melia whispered to her in a voice clearly meant to be overheard, "but I wouldn't worry too much about it. Especially if you're hanging around him all the time. He's always acting like a weirdo, so pretty soon, you'll have forgotten all about the holy knight business and just be rolling your eyes at him."

Sain frowned.

"Uh... Is that supposed to be a compliment?"

Melia smiled politely at him. He sighed.

"I guess not."

Soon after, they arrived at the first floor of the intermediate division's school building.

"All right, let's register, then," he said as they approached the registration desk.

"Signing up for the battle expo? Please fill out this form."

The student at the desk handed them some papers. Sain and Melia each took one and began filling it in.

"Yo, get a load of this. The Darkness Dork is signing up."

"Who're you calling Darkness Dork, damn it?!"

Sain reflexively bristled at the gibe and turned to find three male students he didn't recognize. The brown-haired one who'd spoken snorted and looked down his nose at him.

"Just give it up, man. Losers like you have no place in the battle expo. You won't stand a chance."

"Yeah, you're just gonna lose your first match."

"Hell, you'll end up being an embarrassment for the whole school."

The three of them laughed among themselves.

"Hmph... Don't get too full of yourselves. You'll regret it."

"What?"

Sain's face was set in a defiant grin.

“Back when I first came to this school, I might have been a little incompetent. But now, my control over dark magic has matured, and I’ve mastered countless new spells! In fact, I’ll have you know that I made a name for myself during the field exercises last month!”

Melia and Alicia immediately chimed in.

“A *little* incompetent?”

“Also, *countless* new spells? What, did you fail first-grade math or something? Because it seems pretty countable to me.”

“Would you quit with the heckling, damn it?!”

The two girls giggled in response.

“The field exercises?” The brown-haired student paused for a moment. “All I remember hearing was that the other three members of your team were insanely strong.”

“Yeah, I heard that too. The Darkness Dork was just straight-up deadweight,” his friend added.

“No! That can’t be!” Sain let out a wail of agony at the crushing reality of the current gossip. “B-But... I’ve still gotten stronger... And I’ll prove it to you right here if you don’t believe me!”

He tried to sound confident, but there was just a little too much involuntary tremolo in his voice to sell it. The student called his bluff and scoffed.

“Hah, keep barking, loser. I know you got no bite to back it up.”

They glared at each other, and just when it seemed like things might take a violent turn, a girl stepped up beside them.

“Please cease this juvenile squabble.”

One glance at the newcomer was all it took for the trio’s belligerent attitude to wither.

“U-Uh, of course...”

The vice-president of the student council, Emilia, stood there with an air of authority, her fine purple hair cascading down to the small of her back.

“If you feel even a sliver of pride as students of Jenifa, then you should be competing with your skills instead of your words. Why don’t you gentlemen settle your dispute through a more appropriate avenue? Like, say, the battle expo?”

Her criticism was spot-on, and none of them could offer a rebuttal. Eventually, the brown-haired student turned away.

“...I was going to do that anyway,” he muttered before leaving with his friends.

With his opponent departed, Sain calmed down as well.

“Thank you... for, uh, defusing the situation.”

“No need to thank me. More importantly, break time is almost over. If you’re going to register, you should hurry up.”

“Good point.”

He went back to the form. After filling it all out, he and Melia both handed their forms in to the student at the desk.

“...Sain Fostess.” Emilia said in a soft voice. “Do you know the student council president?”

“You mean Cain? Uh... I know *of* him, but we haven’t really spoken much. Why?”

Emilia frowned.

“He... seems rather interested in you, lately.”

Her voice was pensive, almost as if she were speaking to herself. After that, she simply gave him a polite bow of her head and left. He watched her go. It wasn’t just him, then. Even Emilia, who assisted Cain on a daily basis, felt that the president’s recent behavior was unusual. The corner of his lips curled up in a confident smile.

“Heh, it looks like this battle expo is going to be an interesting one.”

“For everyone who gets tangled up with you, at least,” said Alicia with a sigh.

If there was going to be trouble, she figured that she was staring at the source of it.

Chapter 1: Battle Expo

The sun peeked over the horizon. There was still a brisk chill in the morning air, but Sain was already standing in a circular structure at the edge of the school grounds. Clean white walls surrounded him on all sides, and the ground underfoot was a layer of soil and grass. A dazzling garden of flowers radiated outwards from the middle of the room. A sturdy door served as a reminder that despite its scenic beauty, the area was normally off-limits to students. It was, he thought, a bit of a waste.

He walked to the center of the room, where an enormous staff protruded from the ground and reached all the way to the ceiling. He'd been here when he first came to this school to perform some maintenance on the barrier that surrounded its premises. Last time, on the day of the entrance ceremony, he'd come to repair the barrier. This time, he was here to give it an upgrade in strength and function. He closed his eyes, focused his mind, and reached toward the staff with his right hand. Five minutes passed, after which he opened his eyes again.

"All right, that should do it..." he said as he relaxed. "Hey, Goddess, how's the barrier adjustment going?"

"I'm done! And it's perfect! I made it so it can handle incoming guests too, just like you wanted!" the Goddess Vicitaelia said in a blithe tone.

Her form and voice could only be perceived by Sain. To anyone else, it would have looked like he was talking to himself in an empty room. From his perspective, however, the gently smiling figure of the Goddess was clear as day.

"Thanks. Oh, how strong did you—"

"I maxed it out, of course!"

"I figured as much... No wonder it took so long. I told you the headmaster only needed it to be a little stronger than before, didn't I? What do I have to do to get you to stop being so overprotective...?"

"It's not overprotective if it's you. It'd be a big problem if something happened to you, so I made it strong enough that no human can possibly

break it. Even for Chaos, the only thing that can get through it now is probably a Founder.”

“All of whom are sealed away.”

He sighed and shook his head before turning to leave. The Goddess could be downright insufferable with her mother-hen attitude, but he'd be lying if he said it didn't make him feel a little warm and fuzzy inside, sometimes. He really treasured the time he spent chatting with her.



“Master Sain, are you done?” Melia, who’d been waiting at the edge of the room, called to him.

“Yeah.”

The Goddess’s form vanished. She had never actually been there; her corporeal form existed up in the heavens. What he had seen was more like a projection of sorts. This projection allowed her to see what her holy knight was doing, and she could do so at will. This meant that, normally, she could peep on him whenever she wanted, and his privacy was at the mercy of her whims. He’d found this rather unacceptable and made the Goddess promise that she’d never pop in for a look without his permission. Currently, unless he consciously summoned her, she couldn’t send out a projection, and therefore had no idea what was happening around him. He was pretty sure that, had he not established this rule, she’d be even more overbearing right now. It wasn’t that he didn’t appreciate her care and concern, and he certainly enjoyed talking to her, but there was always a limit to these things. Too much, and it just became draining. He did allow for one exception to the rule, though — she could intervene without consent during emergencies involving the sudden appearance of Chaos.

“All right, Headmaster, I finished making the adjustments to the barrier that you requested.”

“Ah, much appreciated. You’ve been a great help.” The headmaster, who was standing beside Melia, nodded and stroked the silver strands of his prized beard before adding, “Sorry to make you do this on the day of the event.”

“I don’t mind. It’s something that had to be done.”

The battle expo was beginning today, and for three days hence, there would be a flood of outside guests into the school. In order to deal with this surge, the headmaster had asked Sain to modify the barrier in two ways. The first was to strengthen it against the unlikely scenario of forced entry. The second was to add a screening function to check if any visitors were in possession of anything suspicious. Thanks to the Goddess’s enthusiastic workmanship, it now excelled in both aspects. Soon, it would be put to good use. Vendor stalls were already going up in the school grounds, and most of their personnel would arrive in a few hours. Then, at ten in the morning, regular guests would be allowed in.

“I have to say, though, this staff is a piece of work. I remember being impressed when I saw it on the day of the entrance ceremony, but it’s still

just as impressive. This thing soaks up the blessing of the goddess like a sponge. A normal staff would have shattered a long time ago.”

“My knowledge of it comes from the previous headmaster, who told me that it’s called the Titan’s Staff. Apparently, it’s a magical instrument created by people in ancient times to assist the gods.”

“Created by people... to assist the gods...”

Sain looked up at the towering staff in the middle of the room, his gaze pensive. There had been a time when people labored in support of the gods. They doubtlessly provided the gods with plenty: care, trust, even devotion... but never companionship. They could stand for the gods, but in the end, none could stand beside them.

“Speaking of which, Sir Knight, I believe you’re also participating in the tournament?”

“I sure am, and I’m so ready for this.”

“Is that so? Well, I’m looking forward to seeing you put on a good show, then.”

“You should, because I’m going to be the champion,” Sain declared with confidence.

Melia gave him a flat look before turning to the headmaster and whispering in her trademark not-very-quiet voice, “Don’t take him too seriously. He does this sometimes when it’s that time of the month.”

Sain scowled at her. Admittedly, the “going to be champion” part was a joke, but he certainly intended to try for it.

“Hohoho, very good. I’m glad to see that you’re enjoying yourselves, as well.” The headmaster chuckled as he regarded them. The twinkle in his eyes wasn’t just reverence for the holy knight, but also affection for two of his students. “And how go your dark magic studies?”

“Well, they’re... going, I guess, but the power of the holy knight in me definitely gets in the way. I mean, I knew it would, but it makes it so hard to control dark magic.”

“Even with the seals?”

“Yeah. These seals are only meant to nullify the portion of the power that leaks out of me. They can only handle so much.”

The headmaster pursed his lips. There was a limit to how much power the seals could cancel, and overusing them would be unwise. After all, they weren’t exactly cheap.

“Hm, you know, I’ve been thinking... This power of the holy knight in you... can you temporarily transfer it to someone else?”

“Transfer? What... do you mean?”

“I heard that when you induct an attendant into your service as the holy knight, you impart them with a portion of your power. In that case, can’t you use the same method to temporarily move all your power to an attendant—”

“No, I can’t.”

His answer was firm. In fact, Alicia had asked him about this before.

“The attendants are not as attuned to the blessing of the goddess as I am. If they take in too much power, it’ll overload their bodies.”

“I see... I apologize for my ignorance. The musings of an amateur like myself don’t hold much water, do they?”

“Don’t say that. What you suggested isn’t impossible, exactly.”

In his continual efforts to become the dark knight, Sain had explored a number of possibilities, one of which was the very method suggested by the headmaster. He’d already given the idea some thought.

“When it comes down to it, the holy knight is just a person who’s perfectly attuned to the blessing of the goddess. There have to be other people in the world who, even if they’re not quite my equal, possess an exceptional capacity to accept her power. If I ever run into someone like that, then it might be worth giving your idea a try.”

The headmaster nodded in comprehension.

“Don’t bet on it, though,” quipped Melia.

He lifted an eyebrow at her. She shrugged.

“Just saying. Hasn’t happened so far.”

She was right, of course. He let out a resigned sigh.

“Yeah... You’re right. I’ve never seen anyone like that.”

After all, Sain’s attunement to the goddess’s blessing was apparently the greatest ever recorded. It was why he was called the strongest holy knight in history. Even if there were people in the world who were more attuned than others, it was hard to imagine that they’d be a better fit than Sain. Melia and Alicia were both attendants of the holy knight, but neither of them was more attuned than the average person. That was why Sain had to control their power output when they tapped into the goddess’s power. Attendants, therefore, were definitely no silver bullet for his problems; they came with their own fair share of challenges. For example, if multiple

attendants tried to use their blessing-infused abilities at the same time, he'd have to simultaneously control the flows of power into each of them.

"Ah, but I digress," said the headmaster. "The battle expo will begin soon. Do try to get some rest before then, Sir Knight."

"I think I will."

He had matches lined up, and he wanted to be in optimal condition for them. Leaving the headmaster to lock up, he and Melia stepped outside.

At ten in the morning, the battle expo officially kicked off, and visitors swarmed into the school grounds. This event was arguably the origin of Jenifa's fame, as it was what first put them on the map. From there, the academy continued to host the tournament annually and steadily gained prominence in the Kingdom of Loribania, eventually becoming the renowned institution they were now.

The battle expo consisted of a series of one-on-one duels between students. Competition was fierce, and the abilities on display frequently surpassed everyone's expectations. Every aspect of the event trumpeted the academy's philosophy of a thorough commitment to meritocracy. As a result, the spectators' seats were filled not only by regular guests looking for a good show, but often military officers, knights, and garrison guards, as well.

At the same time, the battle expo was also a festival. This was evident from the tremendous number of roadside stalls that had already been erected in the school grounds.

"Wh-Whoa, this is..."

Sain gaped at the sea of vendors across the field.

"...Total chaos."

"...It sure is."

Overwhelmed by the avalanche of sensory stimuli, they walked for a while in incredulous silence. A great many stalls had set up metal plates, on which a dazzling variety of foods sizzled. The mouthwatering noise was frequently drowned out by the vendors' employees, who tended to their goods at a leisurely pace while loudly bidding passersby to take a closer look. All sorts of sweet and fruity aromas vied for attention as they drifted through the air. It was almost a little too much to take in.

"...At least it's chaos with a small c," said Melia, the quip signaling that she'd recovered from the initial sensory shock.

“Yeah, the kind that doesn’t try to rip your throat out. I guess it’s sort of nice in comparison.”

Sain was no stranger to crowds. Back when holy knighting was still his day job, he’d walked through plenty of them. This, however, was different. It was more like... wading through. He was used to being surrounded by people and drawing attention, but they’d always kept a certain distance. These people didn’t care about him or his personal space. It was a little jarring at first to brush shoulders with so many people just getting from point A to point B.

“Oh, there they are. Hey, over here, you two!”

They heard Alicia’s voice over the din of the crowd. Soon, they were reunited with her and Marni, the latter having donned her gray hooded cloak to conceal her hair and features — likely out of concern about being seen by the outside guests.

“Where did you go? We were waiting for you outside your dorm,” said Alicia.

“Sorry, headmaster’s request. We had to go adjust the barrier around the school. There wasn’t enough time to go back to the dorm afterwards, so we just came directly to school to get some rest.”

The environment here, as it turned out, was not very conducive to resting. Vendors had started setting up an hour ago, getting ready to handle the impending flood of customers. Being such a large festival, there was no shortage of excitement, and there was a tangible buzz in the air. Tangible and *audible*, as particularly motivated vendors had their employees loudly reciting greeting phrases en masse to warm up their vocal cords for what would doubtlessly be a taxing day. For a long while his ears were assaulted by echoes of “look around, take your time” and “thank you, come again.”

“For a school event, some of these guys are taking things pretty seriously,” Sain said as he looked around.

Not all of the booths were standard roadside fare. Some looked like legitimate stores, with uniformed staff and windowed walls, beyond which lay shelves lined with items that looked to have very little mercy for the health of one’s wallet.

“Yeah, it looks like a couple of the more famous stores in the capital city have set up shop here, too,” said Alicia. “They’re probably targeting the guests more than the students.”

The festival was meant to entertain not only the students, but all visitors, which explained the dizzying variety of its vendors. The sheer incongruity of it all was fascinating and, in a way, gave it a unique sort of character. For the next three days, this place was going to be a hub of activity and generate a lot of business. The vendors clearly knew this and had every intention of squeezing as much profit from the event as possible. Despite its short duration, plenty of them had begun work many days in advance to put up very elaborate stalls.

“Whoa... Maid?”

Sain’s sudden remark earned him puzzled looks from his friends.

“Oh, I mean— Not Maid, but *a* maid. Over there.”

They remained confused until they looked in the direction he was pointing, where they spotted a girl in a maid uniform handing out flyers.

“That smile looks so fake. Also, her bows are too stiff,” said Melia.

“Oh, come on. Cut her some slack. Besides, I think there’s a certain amateur charm to her.”

He watched with a kind of pensive fondness as the girl went about her work. Beside him, Melia’s cheeks began to inflate like a pufferfish.

“...Oh, I see how it is. Master Sain likes *those* kinds of maids.”

“Huh? What? I didn’t say anything about liking—”

“Just so you know, she’s really just an amateur on the inside. All looks and no substance. Cooking, cleaning, washing, looking after her master... That’s what maids are about — perfecting their skills. But apparently, Master Sain would rather have a maid who just puts on a show and pretends to be loyal. Master Sain likes *fake* maids.”

“Th-That’s not what I mean. This isn’t about what I like...”

It occurred to him that he’d inadvertently wounded Melia’s pride as a maid. Granted, ever since moving into the dorm, he’d stopped asking Melia to perform her usual maidly duties. As a result, he’d lapsed a bit in the thoughtfulness department. Just then, the flyer-distributing girl in question approached him.

“Would you happen to be a Jenifa student?”

“U-Uh, yes?”

“Welcome to Honey Love, then! We’re a maid cafe, and we’d love it if you’d come in and spend some time with us, Master!”

The girl in the maid uniform gently placed her hands around his. Then, she looked up at him and smiled.

“U-Um, err...” he stammered, feeling a fluttering sensation in his stomach.

He stared at her in a daze as she casually slipped a flyer onto his outstretched palm, spun around, and walked away. He quietly watched her go, her frilly skirt shaking with each step she took.

“Hmph!”

A grunt entered his ears mere moments before a fist slammed into his side. The impact made him double over.

“Ooof!”

He groaned and looked up, only to flinch at Melia’s murderous glare.

“That was totally your fault.”

“...Agreed.”

Alicia and Marni were both on her side.

“Someone seems to be letting it go to their head, aren’t they, *Master* ?”

“I-I’m so sorry... I’ll reflect on my actions. I swear.”

It’d been a long time since he’d seen that look from Melia, but he recognized it immediately as the face she made when she was about to snap. Half-panicked, he put every bit of sincerity he could muster into his apology. In the process, however, he furtively slipped the flyer for the maid cafe into his coat pocket.

“You know, it’s sort of weird to be bringing this up now, but Maid can be a pretty confusing nickname,” said Alicia.

“That’s been bothering me for a while, actually,” said Melia. “Is it just me or am I the only one who got a really lazy nickname?”

“Th-That’s not true! It’s just that, uh, we met each other so long ago, and at the time, you were the only one I called Maid, so...”

Seeing that Melia was visibly displeased, Sain hastily offered an explanation. Back when he was still publicly operating as the holy knight in the Holy Kingdom of Lightridge, the plan had been to assign dozens of maids and butlers to serve him when he reached the age of ten. However, as he already had a personal attendant in Melia, and she happened to be exceedingly competent, there was never any need to expand his retinue. As a result, she continued to serve as his sole attendant. Thenceforth, whenever he called for a maid, she would appear, and the name simply stuck.

Sain had never been particularly comfortable with the idea of being looked after by a servant, but Melia had an impeccable grasp of his sensibilities and always kept just the right distance from him. For anything

he wanted to do himself, she'd maintain a hands-off attitude and watch from the sidelines. Meanwhile, she helped handle matters that were beyond his reach, but always kept her assistance subtle. He, of course, wasn't blind to her contributions, and he was deeply appreciative of the delicate discretion she displayed. Throughout the years, it wasn't so much her competence as an attendant as it was simple affinity that kept them working so well together. The two of them had good chemistry. That was why even after resolving to leave his homeland behind, he still brought her along with him.

"So you see? To me, Maid means you. There was and still is only one."

"I see. That would have meant a lot to me... if I hadn't seen the way you were looking at that girl."

"Gah! That was... a surprise attack! I wasn't ready!"

Melia was extremely dismissive of the girl in the maid uniform, but all things considered, it should be fair to say that there was a market for her services. After all, when she'd held his hand, his heart had almost leapt out of his chest. That had to be some kind of skill. Maid or not, she was a professional in her own right.

"On that note, Sain, I've got a problem with my nickname too. Miss Gold? Like, seriously? What's the deal?"

"It's your hair color."

"I know that! I'm saying it sounds cheesy as hell! How would you like to be called your hair color?" complained Alicia.

"In terms of nicknames, Miss Marni seems to have the most fitting one," said Melia.

"...I'm not really a fan of it, but thanks."

What had started out as O Cloaked Reaper of the Stacks was reduced to Grim Editor before being further truncated to Miss Grim. Evidently, Sain should never be allowed to shorten nicknames; he had a tendency to turn them all into characters from children's picture books.

"By the way... it's almost time for the first round," said Marni.

Sain nodded.

"Good point. Let's move."

The junior, intermediate, and senior divisions each had their own sports field outside. The battle expo employed them as arenas, and matches would proceed simultaneously in all three. Sain's first match was taking place in the intermediate division's field, which he was more than familiar with.

Spectator seats had been set up around the field, and many of them were already filled.

“Do all the seats tend to fill up?” he asked.

“Yeah, usually. Just so you know, this is nothing compared to the semifinals and finals on the third day. For those, everyone moves to the senior division field, which is the biggest arena, and they do one match at a time.”

“I see. So this is only a third of the total audience, and three times this many people will eventually all gather in one place...”

Even with the audience splitting themselves up among three locations, this arena already had at least five hundred people. Presumably, the other two were no different. That, however, only served to emphasize the sheer size of the school grounds, which already held over fifteen hundred people and didn’t seem cramped in the least.

“It looks like contestants are supposed to wait over there,” said Melia.

She pointed toward the lecture hall. Above its entrance hung a new sign that read “Contestant Waiting Room.” Inside, students dressed in light, loose clothing were waiting with tense expressions on their faces.

“Well, this is as far as we can go. From here on, you’re on your own...” said Alicia. “Go get ’em out there, you hear? We’re rooting for you.”

“R-Right,” he said with a grimace.

His expression made Melia lift an eyebrow.

“What’s with the long face?”

“I... have to admit, I’m starting to feel a little nervous.”

“Oh, relax,” she said, waving her hand dismissively. “What’s the worst that can happen?”

“I lose and make a fool of myself?”

“You already do that on a daily basis, anyway.”

“I... But—”

“It’s okay. You already hit rock bottom. There’s no way to go from here but up.”

“...That must be the most demotivating pep talk I’ve ever heard.”

It was the kind of verbal harassment that normally would have drawn forth one of his usual hyperbolic responses, but he failed to produce one. His nerves really were doing a number on him, and bravado was beyond him at the moment.

Uh oh, I’m definitely getting too nervous for my own good.

He hadn't been this anxious during the field exercises. The reason probably lay in his friends and their comforting presence. So long as they lent him their strength, he'd felt confident that they could overcome any challenge. The battle expo, however, was single combat. He could rely on no one's strength but his own.

What if I step out there for my first match and immediately lose?

His loud and almost daily professions of his intention to become the dark knight were really going to come back to bite him if he immediately bowed out of the tournament with a humiliating defeat. He had, of course, trained hard for this very day. Sure, he'd talked the talk, but he'd also walked the walk, twice over.

Which was the problem. It was because he'd put in so much work that the thought of it all being in vain became unbearable. He tried to calm himself, but he simply couldn't stop himself from imagining that terrible moment when his tireless efforts slammed against the wall of reality and shattered into worthless pieces.

I'm scared.

He'd been the holy knight for almost as long as he could remember. For someone like him, who'd been able to call upon the borrowed strength of the goddess for his whole life, believing in himself was exceedingly difficult. He'd put in the work, but had he gotten better? He wasn't sure, and the absence of confidence left a void that was quickly filled by doubt.

"You'll be fine."

He glanced up. It was Marni.

"I told you this last month," she continued, "but I'll say it again. You learned how to use *Dark Ray*. By human standards, that spell should be considered advanced-level magic. It should be more than enough to defeat most opponents."

"B-But, I haven't mastered that spell yet. I can't use it like you do..."

"Sain." She looked directly into his eyes. "None of us here thinks you're weak. Not anymore."

Her comment drew nods from the other two girls as well. He met each of their gazes in turn. Reflected in their eyes was his own image. He looked stronger than he'd remembered. Slowly, the doubt began to recede, pushed back by a growing wave of confidence.

"Okay... I'm trusting you."

He smiled. Marni did the same. Her smile, however, carried a hint of amusement.

“Actually... You’ll probably be more than fine.”

“What?”

“Try this. As soon as the match starts, use *Dark Ray* .”

“U-Uh, okay. I’ll do that.”

Seeing as it was advice that came directly from his mentor, it was probably worth a try. He’d intended to make early use of *Dark Ray* anyway. The spell’s strengths lay in its speed and penetration power, which meant that, conversely, it had the inherent weakness of going only in a straight line. When the match first began, the contestants would be facing each other. Furthermore, there would be no barriers in between them. It presented the perfect opportunity to land a shot of *Dark Ray* .

He and Melia stepped into the lecture hall and waited for their matches to commence.

“It looks like we’re going to be in different arenas for our first matches,” she said as she scanned the tournament brackets.

“Looks like it, yeah.”

Sain was scheduled for the second match to take place in the intermediate division’s field while Melia’s first appearance would be the third match in the senior’s division’s field. Neither of them could afford to spectate the other’s match in full if they intended to show up for their own on time.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we thank you for your patience! I am pleased to announce that the magic battle exposition will now officially begin!”

An announcer’s voice, amplified by magic, filled the air. It was soon followed by a roar of excitement from the gathering crowds. After some brief introductions by the pairs of commentators for each arena, the tournament quickly got under way.

“Contestants participating in the second round of matches, please head to your arenas!” instructed one of the tour staff standing at the entrance to the lecture hall.

First-round contestants were already in the field staring each other down. Those up next were supposed to wait their turn nearby.

“Try your best then, Master Sain.”

“You too, Maid. Then again, I doubt you’ll have to try very hard to win your matches.”

“Hey, it’s not *always* a cakewalk for me, you know.”

At the very least, it didn’t seem like she was going to have any trouble with her first match. Neither of them knew their first opponent, but no Jenifa student was going to be a pushover. No one could afford to let their guard down. He waved goodbye to Melia and made his way to his designated arena.

“If I’m going to run into Maid in the brackets, it’ll be... the semifinals.”

Neither of them had explicitly discussed the possibility, but he’d checked Melia’s position in the tournament brackets as soon as he’d received his copy. Normally, she was his faithful attendant, who meticulously looked after his every private and public need. During the battle expo, however, she was also a potential opponent, and a very intimidating one, at that.

“Augh, come on. Focus on the task at hand. First, I need to win my match...” he muttered, reminding himself to be always mindful that he was the untested challenger. As the underdog, he’d have to earn every victory.

He exhaled, steeled himself, and stepped into the ring. A commentator — one of the academy’s female students — announced the competitors’ entrance, and the audience erupted in excitement.

“Our contestants for the second match today will be Sain Fostess and Noel Tidman!”

Sain looked across the arena at a boy with gray hair. The commentators continued speaking in the background.

“Sain is a first-year student, whereas his opponent, Noel, is a second-year student. Based on the stats alone, it would seem that Noel has an advantage, but Sain can be... a rather unpredictable fellow. Perhaps he’ll have some surprises for us.”

“Well, for a lot of our audience, that outfit must be the first one. Students in the intermediate division have gotten used to seeing him like that, so you don’t hear people talking about it anymore, but for any newcomers, that getup is going to leave an impression.”

The other commentator — a male student — kept the banter going as he provided more details. Both commentators appeared to be from the intermediate division, which might have been an intentional arrangement, seeing as the match involved two intermediate division contestants. Familiarity with the contestants would indeed allow for more interesting commentary.

Sain stood there in the ring, feeling the eyes of the spectators on him. His jet black coat was decorated with its usual slew of jangling accessories. Were this a serious duel that demanded silence and respect, they'd have disqualified him on his looks alone. Fortunately, the battle expo was a spectacle meant to entertain, and his bizarre appearance actually served to amuse the audience. Of course, for the two of them currently in the ring, the impending duel was nothing if not serious.

Close inspection of the audience seats revealed plenty of spectators who were not average citizens. There were clearly Loribanian knights present. For ambitious Jenifa students, this event was a perfect opportunity to make an impression. Judging by his sober attitude and the unwavering look of determination in his eyes, the boy named Noel had probably entered this tournament for such a purpose.

Of course, Sain was no less determined. He had no interest in making a name for himself in the eyes of outside guests, but he did intend to test himself. If he wanted to find out how good he really was, he had to treat his matches seriously. There would be no playing around.

As the crowds cheered, he put on the substitute pendant the receptionist had given him. It was the same kind he'd used during the field exercises, and its function was to absorb pain and damage in place of the wearer, shattering when the absorbed amount would otherwise be fatal. The contestant whose pendant shattered first would lose the match.

"Let's start the countdown!"

The commentator's enthusiastic declaration was followed by the appearance of a magically-projected screen in the middle of the arena. Displayed on it was a number that changed by the second — 10, 9, 8, and so on. With the match about to begin, Sain gave his opponent one last look-over. Whereas Sain was wearing a sword on the left side of his waist, Noel was unarmed. Presumably, his opponent employed a magic-focused fighting style, which was most effective at a medium range. Considering they'd start the battle standing at exactly that kind of distance from each other, Noel might be hoping to hit him hard and fast right off the bat.

He recalled the words of his mentor. Marni had instructed him to attack as soon as the match began. Assuming his analysis of his opponent was correct, if he wanted to strike first, he wouldn't have time to carefully observe his opponent; he'd have to come out swinging. His initial attack probably wasn't going to win him the match, but if it landed, he'd be in a

great position to follow up. Even if it missed, it'd at least buy him a few seconds while his opponent dodged away.

As the countdown neared zero, he tightened his fists. His friends believed in him, and he was going to repay their trust by winning.

"Zero! Let the match begin!" yelled the commentators, signaling the start of the duel.

Noel had barely lifted a finger before Sain thrust out his hand and shouted, "*Dark Ray!*"

A lance of darkness shot out of his palm. Like a comet, it drew a black trail through the air as it sped toward Noel. The boy's eyes went wide at the sudden threat.

"Wha—?!"

One second. That was all it took. A mere second after the match began, the magic spear shot across the field and slammed into Noel's chest with a thunderous crack, kicking up a massive cloud of dust in the process.

"What just— N-No way—"

A commentator's incredulous voice could be heard as the spell kept going, leaving a trail like a black bolt of lightning across the entire length of the arena. It soon faded, and a gust of wind cleared away the dust plume, revealing a dazed Noel lying on his back all the way at the edge of the ring. His substitute pendant had shattered, causing a pale blue barrier to be deployed around him, protecting him from any further attacks.

At first, there was silence. Then, the commentators began shouting at the top of their lungs.

"That's it! That's it! It's done! The second match is over, and the winner is Sain Fostess! It all happened in the blink of an eye! Unbelievable! Look! The crowd is roaring!"

"Absolutely! Let me tell you, that was definitely not what I expected!"

Everyone was astonished by the result. The commentators, the audience, even Sain himself.

"Mere seconds after the match began, Sain knocked Noel out with a lightning-fast spell! What a decisive victory that was!"

"I'd say this is an example of a sneak attack going brilliantly well. Noel didn't even have a chance to show what he could do. It was certainly an effective tactic. Hit them hard, hit them fast, and seal the deal before they can react. Sain definitely deserves credit for the way he took such swift and decisive action in the opening seconds of the match."

“He sure hit him hard and fast, but... what did he hit him *with* ? Was it... dark magic? Like, is it just me or have I never seen that spell before?”

“I don’t think it’s you. I’ve never seen anything like it either. It’s... possible he just used a very rare spell that’s not taught in school.”

“Wow! Maybe he’s going to be the dark horse of this tournament!”

Sain, meanwhile, made no attempt to celebrate his victory. He simply stood there in the ring, still as a statue. His classmates, who’d been watching him from the spectator seats, began talking nervously amongst themselves.

“Y-Yo, did you see that? What just happened?”

“That has to be a fluke, right? I mean, we’re talking about that loser...”

“B-But... could you have dodged that thing?”

The match’s outcome was received quite differently from person to person. Those unfamiliar with Sain found it surprising at best. To those who saw him on a daily basis, however, the result was absolutely mind-blowing. In fact, the mind that was most blown probably belonged to Sain himself, who stared with wide-eyed wonder at Noel, his hand pressed painfully to his head as he left the arena with the assistance of staff. Eventually, Sain collected himself and made his way toward the stands. Along the way, Marni approached him with small, even steps.

“See? I told you so.” She sounded pleased. “You might not realize it... but you’ve steadily gotten stronger in these past months. At this point, you’re not going to have much trouble against the average student.”

Sain’s victory was clear proof of his strength, but he’d won in such an unexpected manner that the audience hadn’t managed to process the implications yet. Sooner or later, though, they’d clue in.

“Huh... Haha... Hahaha...”

The numbness finally faded, and triumph welled up from inside him, bursting out in the form of a long bout of laughter.

“Mwahahahahaha! The omens finally ring true! I am indeed the one chosen by darkne— Ow!”

“Simmer down.”

He grimaced and nursed the spot on his shin that Marni kicked.

“That spell was always best suited for surprise attacks. It’s brutally effective against people who haven’t seen it before... so don’t expect it to be so effective next time.”

“G-Good point.”

He took a moment to appreciate her insight. It made him glad to have her as his mentor. Her sober tone also had the effect of cooling his head, which had been a tad feverish from the victory, and allowed him to do a bit of reflecting.

It all felt so surreal. He remembered how things had been when he first sealed away his holy knight powers. Back then, every enemy had felt like a massive hurdle to overcome. When he'd just arrived at the school, he wasn't sure if he could even take down a goblin by himself. Now, he'd improved enough to defeat an upperclassman without breaking a sweat. His progress was so smooth that it was almost scary. He felt like the protagonist of a story.

"In any case, congratulations on winning your first match," said Alicia as she walked up behind Marni. "To be honest... back when school just started, I really didn't think you'd become this strong."

"Yeah... neither did I. All that tutoring must have paid off. I'm lucky to have met such a good mentor."

Sain's compliment elicited a faint blush from Marni.

"Oh, wait a minute! I have to go watch Maid—"

"I'm back."

He was just about to dash off to spectate Melia's match when the person in question showed up behind him. He stared at her in confusion.

"Wait, what? What are you doing here? Shouldn't you be at your match?"

"I was."

"...Huh? Didn't it just start?"

"Mmhm."

"...Oh. I see. No mercy, huh?"

"Nope."

Unlike Sain's instant victory, which was the result of a healthy dose of beginner's luck, Melia's came from pure skill. Judging by the pristine state of her clothes, she probably just went in, curb-stomped her opponent in the blink of an eye, and casually strolled out of the arena.

"Well, anyway, at least we both advanced to our second matches."

"I'm looking forward to the two of us going head to head, Master Sain."

"...Th-There are still plenty of matches before that. Let's not get ahead of ourselves. Besides, there's still a chance that you don't make it all the

way through the brackets, right?”

Even he didn't believe that last part. In fact, he was already starting to dread the professional asskicking he was going to receive.

“If you two run into each other, it'll be in the semifinals, I think?” asked Alicia.

“According to what it says here, yes.”

Melia unfolded a piece of paper and showed it to her. Drawn on it were the tournament brackets. She regarded the diagram with interest before frowning at a particular column.

“Wait... Doesn't this mean your third match might be against Cain?”

Melia's expression sobered.

“It certainly does... and chances are, it will be.”

“Yeah... Hm?” Alicia lifted an eyebrow. “But your second match is—”

“Yo, Sain!”

Before she could finish her sentence, someone shouted in their direction. They turned to see a familiar sight: two red-headed twins. Rayde, the older of the pair, let out a hearty laugh, while his sister Yuria, standing half a pace behind him, tipped her head in a polite nod.

“Hey, it's the Eldises,” said Sain, greeting his foes-turned-friends. Ever since they'd met in mock mortal combat during the field studies, their relationship had taken a more amicable turn. Despite being in different classes, he'd meet the twins every so often and enjoy a quick chat.

“Ah, how could we forget,” said Melia. “Of course they'd be here, too.”

“You bet we are. And we're both through our first match. Looks like you both won yours too, huh? Now, that makes me happy.” Rayde grinned with teeth. “It looks like there'll be some people who'll actually make me work for my wins.”

Alicia rolled her eyes at that.

“Says the ones who lost to us in the field exercises.”

“Hah, it's one-on-one now, so don't get too cocky. Sure, we lost to you last time, but that was because of your teamwork. I'm more of a solo type. Same goes for Yuria. This time, things'll be different,” declared the older Eldis with the confidence of someone who absolutely believed what he was saying. Then, in a sudden reversal of his usual defiant attitude, he turned to Marni and spoke with a slight stammer. “By the way... D-Did you, uh, enter the tournament?”

Marni, who hadn't been expecting anyone to talk to her, was caught by surprise. It took her a few seconds to respond.

"...That's none of your business."

"Oof... B-But, I guess you're right..."

Rayde visibly wilted. For someone who had been making fun of Marni at every turn during her hermit days in the library tower, that was a rather unexpected reaction. It almost seemed like he wanted to establish some kind of rapport with Marni. Sain, who'd noticed a change in Rayde's attitude toward Marni since the field exercises, simply figured he'd spent some time reflecting on how badly he'd treated Marni before, and that this was his way of showing repentance.

"Don't take it personally. Miss Grim is simply reserved by nature. She is a lady of few words," said Sain.

He was trying to make things a little less awkward between the two, but he only earned himself a glare from Marni.

"...I can speak for myself, thank you very much. And I meant what I said."

The conversation came to an abrupt end, and the silence became increasingly awkward until it was broken by Yuria.

"Pardon me, um, Sir Sain?"

He almost jumped at the way she addressed him, thinking for a moment that his cover was blown, but it quickly occurred to him that she'd always had this slightly formal style of speech. It was a quirk of hers, he supposed. Still, it felt weird to be called Sir by someone other than the headmaster.

"U-Um, I, uh..."

She stammered nervously, as though trying to muster the courage to speak, before blurting out, "L-Long time no see!"

"Uh, yeah? It's been a while, I guess," he answered with a puzzled look.

"A-As you may already be aware, should we both proceed smoothly through our brackets, we will face each other in our third match."

He was indeed aware, so he nodded and gestured for her to continue.

"So, um... I'd just like to say... I'm rooting for you! So you'd better keep winning until then!" she exclaimed with her finger pointed at him in what was probably meant to be a gesture of challenge, if not for her intensely reddened cheeks.

A few seconds later, she pressed her palms to her face as though trying to hide behind them. Then, finding them inadequate, she quickly shuffled back behind her brother. The whole sequence left Sain utterly flummoxed.

Everyone else, though, was more than aware of what was going on.

“Maaaaster Saaaain?”

“Ow! Ow!” He flinched at a sharp sensation of pain in his side.

“It looks like you reeled another one in, doesn’t it?” Melia said with her signature I’m-going-to-murder-you smile. She dug her fingers into the soft flesh below his armpit.

“Gah! Stop pinching me, Maid!”

Marni turned to Alicia and whispered in her ear.

“Hey, Alicia. Is Sain... actually sort of a girl magnet?”

“What?! U-Um, good question... Maybe?”

It was a tricky question to answer for Alicia, who happened to be feeling the attraction. Sain was undoubtedly an oddball, which should have made him an unlikely target of affection, but admitting that had some uncomfortable implications. After all, *she’d* fallen for him; what did that make her? At the same time, she wasn’t quite ready to concede that he was a ladies’ man. Thoroughly flustered by the question, she failed to produce a reply for Marni, who studied her and nodded.

“It’s okay. I don’t blame you,” Marni said with her usual unreadable expression. Then, she looked down at her feet and added in a slightly embarrassed tone, “I can definitely see why people fall for him.”

That got a response from Alicia.

“You *what?!* ”



Her eyes went wide, and she suddenly felt a sense of clear and imminent danger — of the romantic variety. Just then, there was an announcement telling contestants to get ready for the next round.

“Well, looks like I’d better get going,” said Rayde, his expression suddenly growing sober. “I want to... get myself focused for my next match.”

“Your next opponent is Cain, right?” asked Alicia.

He nodded.

“Yeah. Once a year, I get to have a crack at him. I’ve been waiting for this chance,” he said with a toothy grin.

For someone like Rayde, who was always looking for a challenge, there was no better opportunity than this. It allowed him to face the student council president, who was widely considered the strongest student in the school, in direct combat. His fixation on Cain was nothing new. Even during the field exercises, he’d been hoping to win first place and ask to be moved one grade up as his reward. That would have put him in the same year as Cain, allowing more opportunities for them to clash in battle.

This was news to Sain, who hadn’t realized that the two would be matched against each other. Another look at the tournament brackets confirmed that what Rayde said was true. His eyes followed the trail of lines back to the column of names, where he discovered the one that lately had been on his mind with increasing frequency.

Cain Theresia .

“Master Sain, would you mind spectating Rayde’s match for me?” asked Melia. “I have to go for my second match, so I can’t be there to watch.”

“Right... Assuming you win, your next opponent will be one of these two, huh... All right. Leave it to me. I’ll get you your intel.”

“Much obliged.”

He was personally interested in the match, too. It was a shame that he couldn’t go root for Melia in person, but a duel between Rayde and Cain was a must-watch. Besides, Melia probably didn’t need any encouragement from him to win, anyway. Her next opponent was someone he’d never heard of, and nameless students stood very little chance of beating her.

“Well, there you have it. I’ll be watching to see what you can do,” he said to the departing pair.

“Keep your eyes peeled then, because I am going to be putting on one hell of a show,” Rayde said, laughing confidently with his hands on his hips. His fingers, however, trembled slightly.

Ten minutes later, Rayde Eldis was on his way to the senior division’s field. He walked with measured strides, feeling the tension in his body build with each step as he neared the arena. Rested and ready, he knew he could be in no better condition to face his oncoming challenge.

“Rayde... I’ll be praying for your victory.”

“...Thanks.”

He regarded Yuria, and she returned his gaze. She looked even more nervous than him, but rather than laughing or cracking some sort of joke, he simply acknowledged her with a nod. His expression was solemn, and his usual bravado was nowhere to be seen. As they beheld each other, they shared a brief moment of vulnerability, feeling the weight of their circumstances bearing down on them — a weight unknown to almost every other student there. Resting on his shoulders was no small responsibility.

Their father, Viscount Eldis, though ostensibly a member of the nobility, wasn’t known for his influence or pedigree. The Eldis family had acquired its present status entirely through military prowess. Normally, when a noble title was newly conferred, the recipient would quickly throw themselves into the power struggles of high society. Whether they sought advancement or protection, they would have to find it within the swirling vortex of aristocratic politics. However, Viscount Eldis refused to play the game. After acquiring his title, he showed no interest in political power, and only pursued further military accomplishments.

During times of war, the Eldis family’s hunger for glory in battle was unmatched. During times of peace, they drew little attention, as they spent most of their time training and honing their skills. At first, this drew the ridicule of their peers, but their stubborn commitment to their ways slowly established a reputation of integrity and trustworthiness founded on their detachment from the complicated web of political interests.

Now, the Eldis family was favored by many nobles for their lack of political ambition and devotion to martial prowess. It was commonly accepted among nobility that the Eldises were the ones to call for a fight. So long as there were enemies — be it humans or monsters — they would handle them, regardless of circumstance. Early on, their skills were often

employed as little more than a convenient tool, but as time passed, their repeated exploits on the battlefield earned the respect of their peers, who began coming to them with earnest pleas for help. The requests ranged from exterminating large monsters that had showed up in someone's lands to lending out their soldiers for various reasons. Considering that nobles were creatures of excessive pride, who were often loath to ask each other for help, that they were willing to petition the Eldis family was a testament to their reputation.

Born as the eldest son of Viscount Eldis — often called the kingdom's finest warrior — Rayde had been trained since a young age to conduct himself in a manner befitting his family's reputation. Burdened with the many responsibilities of being the heir to a renowned military family, “defeat” was a word that often carried more weight than he could bear.

“Coming up is the second round of matches! For this one, we have Rayde Eldis versus Cain Theresia!”

The crowd cheered as the senior division arena's commentators announced the contestants' names. As he'd expected, this match had drawn a sizable number of spectators. Many of them had arrived far in advance to grab seats, and even the standing areas were packed. In addition to the students, many of the outside guests also seemed to be aware that Cain and Rayde were particularly skilled. Over half of the audience was composed of family members of students, so it wasn't surprising that word of their talent had spread.

“Both Rayde and Cain have made names for themselves in this academy for being exceptionally skilled! I suspect there are plenty of people who think this match might as well be the grand finals!”

“Cain in particular is a crowd favorite, considering he won the battle expo last year. And if memory serves, he did it without getting a single scratch on him throughout. We'll see if he can manage the same this year.”

“And if his track record is anything to go by, he might do just that! After all, he's been here since the junior division, and nobody's ever seen him lose! It feels like he's on a different level compared to everyone else! He's so dominant that there's a certain appeal in just seeing him keep his streak going, but as a commentator, I'm hoping for a close match! Rayde, show him what you've got!”

“Hey, come on, what happened to neutral commentary? You can't start taking sides.”

Both the play-by-play guy and the analyst were fired up for the match, and it showed in their commentary. Rayde tuned them out as he quickly scanned the spectator seats and found Sain watching him with an intent gaze. His attendant, Melia, was understandably absent — she had to be waiting at another arena for her own match — but Alicia and Marni seemed to have followed her there as well.

It sucks that Marni isn't here... but maybe it's better this way. Lets me focus better.

He revisited his memories of the field exercises last month. That day, he'd tasted something he hadn't in a long time — defeat. And it had been at the hands of someone in the same year. Granted, he'd let his guard down a little, and he'd been utterly mesmerized by the magic that the dark elf Marni had unleashed. The latter factor in particular was a tad embarrassing for a fighter of his caliber, but it had undoubtedly contributed to his loss. His father was a central figure in his family, and his influence had resulted in Rayde favoring spells designed to be flashy and destructive. Ever since that day, he couldn't get the image of Marni's enchanting profile against the moonlit night out of his mind, and his head was filled with thoughts of one day sitting down with her and learning about the dark magic she'd used.

But right now, he needed to focus, because he was up against an opponent who clearly outclassed him. Like the commentators said, Cain Theresia had entered the magic battle expo in his junior year, and he'd gone through the competition like a hot knife through butter. Rayde had participated in that tournament as well, and he'd fought Cain, only to suffer a crushing defeat.

He looked across the arena at his opponent, whose eyes were cold and indifferent. Cain probably saw him as little more than small fry — a mere pebble on his path to victory — but Rayde was going to prove him wrong. He had to. As the eldest son of the Eldis family, losing twice to the same opponent was out of the question. It was a matter of pride and responsibility, both of which bore down on his shoulders with equal, crushing weight.

“Let's start the countdown!”

A projected screen appeared in the center of the field, and numbers began counting down. Cain was motionless, his gaze sharp and still. Rayde, on the other hand, seemed like he was about to explode. His eyes were bloodshot, and he practically snarled as he fought against the flood of

adrenaline pushing his body to act. He tightened his fists and noticed that his palms were coated with a layer of nervous sweat. He dismissed it. There was no shame in getting the jitters. No one would react differently — not when squaring off against Cain.

A palpable tension in the air quieted the crowd. Silence fell over the ring, and the two of them now commanded the unbroken attention of every person in the audience. Gone was the festive atmosphere, replaced by the cutthroat air of mortal combat. Someone gulped. It sounded as loud as a war drum.

“Let the match begin!”

Rayde burst into motion, sprinting at Cain before the commentator even finished his sentence.

“*Grund Shot!*” he shouted as the earth underfoot flew into the air and hardened into bullets that shot toward Cain.

Rayde Eldis was strong. That much was clear to even an amateur’s eyes. What wasn’t as obvious, however, was that his greatest weapon was not brute strength but his battle sense. His crude appearance and abrasive manner hid an acute understanding of the dynamics of a fight. The *Grund Shot* he used right off the bat was meant to put Cain on the defensive. Earth magic like *Grund Shot* wasn’t as speedy as something like Sain’s *Dark Ray*, but it had a large area of effect, making it difficult to evade entirely.

Cain didn’t evade it. He simply held out his right hand and spoke one soft word.

“*Lighto* .”

Large spheres of light flew through the earthen missiles and erased them from existence.

“Wha—?!”

Rayde stopped in his tracks and stared at the empty air where his spell had been a moment before. *Lighto* was beginner-level light magic. It was supposed to be a weak, fragile spell, entirely unsuited to combat. Instead, it had swallowed his own magic whole. With a snarl, he produced a sword from the soil using *Alchemia* and attempted to bring the fight to Cain, only to be forced back when the cluster of light spheres — undamaged by having passed through his spell — kept coming and threatened to slam into his face.

“Ugh, damn it— these things— hit like— cannonballs!”

He swung his sword this way and that, parrying orb after orb. It didn't feel at all like beginner-level magic. His arms strained against the impact of the blows, which struck his sword each time with immense force. They kept coming, too, and he had no choice but to continue defending himself against the barrage. Cold sweat dripped down his neck. Eventually, there was a loud crack.

"Wha— You gotta be kidding me!"

His sword of earth snapped before crumbling away into dust. With his weapon destroyed, he gave up on his plan to close the distance and retreated. While melee combat was his forte, he was no pushover at medium range, either. A glance at Cain revealed him to be perfectly motionless, his expression calm — almost bored. Rayde ground his teeth, feeling rage fill his chest.

"Great torrent of earth, surge forward as a sea of rubble — Velle Quake!"

With thunderous noise, the ground cracked beneath his feet, forming a fissure that lengthened as if the earth itself was splitting apart. The cleft kept growing in Cain's direction, and the displaced matter — soil and sand and rocks of all kinds — suddenly floated upward before speeding toward him in a torrent of sheer mass.

"Vright."

A gigantic globe of pure light materialized in front of Cain. The next instant, the deluge of debris was no more.

I... I can't even...

Rayde simply gaped. Words failed him. He'd thrown his full power into the spell he just cast, and Cain had just shut it down without batting an eye.

This is too much. How can he be so strong?

Faced with the harsh reality of their gap in strength, his mind went blank. That was when a large lance of light appeared above Cain's head.

"Ray Javelin."

With the sun at its back, its massive form glowed fiercely, almost as if sunlight itself had condensed into a spear. Then, it barreled toward Rayde. Blinding light filled the arena as it slammed into the ground with a deafening explosion and took a chunk of the field with it.

"Auuuugh!"

Rayde screamed as the shockwave slammed into him, carrying with it a burst of wind and dust. He strained against it, unable to open his eyes in the

storm. Amidst the blast, he heard the unmistakable sound of a pendant cracking. When the force finally waned and the dust cleared, he found himself inside a pale blue barrier. He stared at it half-dazed, his mind refusing to process what had happened.

“Th-That’s it! The match is over! The winner is Cain Theresia!”

The audience broke out into cheers, but Rayde barely heard them. The ringing in his ears drowned out the sound — a ringing that might be an after-effect of the blast, but also might be the desperate wail of an ego that refused to acknowledge a cruel truth. Just like that, his match was over. There was no struggle, no climax. There was only a quick, crushing end. He opened his mouth, but no words came. His eyes shifted toward his victorious opponent, who was looking at him with the same calm — almost bored — expression he saw before.

“The two contestants got into it right off the bat, and after an intense back-and-forth, Cain has emerged the victor!”

“Just looking at the results alone, it’s hard to describe his victory as anything other than overwhelming. You’ll notice, for example, that he hasn’t moved an inch since the match began.”

“Wait, really? Huh... Wow, you’re right.”

“It looks like there’s a good chance he’ll sweep this year’s tournament as well.”

Rayde recovered from his shock just in time to catch the tail end of the commentators’ discussion, and he looked at Cain’s position. It was true. He stood in the exact same place he’d been at the start. In other words, throughout the course of the entire match, Rayde never posed enough of a threat to convince Cain to even take a step.

“Damn it...”

Faced with the overwhelming difference in power, a swirl of dark emotions welled up — frustration, regret, anger.

“Damn it all!”

He slammed his fist into the ground. The pain paled in comparison to his mental anguish.

The hunched form of Rayde was a bitter thing to behold. Even from his place in the stands, Sain could see the anger hidden beneath the agony. He understood that anger and knew it was directed at Rayde himself — at his own weakness. Slowly, he looked away.

“...He’s strong.”

As the next pair of contestants entered the arena and prepared themselves, Cain turned and left without a word. Sain watched him go, his steps steady and even. There wasn’t a trace of fatigue. What had been hyped up as the effective grand finals turned out to be almost comically one-sided. Every one of Rayde’s spells had been an impressive display of skill. They were flashy and destructive, and the crowd loved them. *Velle Quake* in particular elicited a round of excited gasps from the audience. Still, it failed to leave even a scratch on Cain. There was never any struggle or suspense. Like the commentators said, the result was an overwhelming victory for Cain. For such a brutal beatdown, however, most of the audience didn’t seem too surprised. In their minds, Cain’s victory was probably a foregone conclusion. They were simply here to enjoy the process of watching it happen. There was no doubt in their minds that Cain would sweep the tournament. For those who had to stand opposite him in the ring, that was a bitter pill to swallow.

“Master Sain.”

He turned to find Melia approaching him.

“Ah, Maid. It looks like you won your match?”

“I sure did.”

Like last time, Melia returned from her match completely unscathed. There wasn’t a single stain on her clothes. Even her hair was still neat.

“And as for this match...” she said, looking around at the audience.

“Looks like it ended the way we all expected it would.”

Just observing the atmosphere in the arena was apparently enough for her to deduce the outcome of Rayde’s match.

“How was the president in battle?”

“Like a stone wall. It wasn’t even close... Honestly, he’s so strong that I don’t think observing his matches will even make any difference.”

In general, Jenifa students were stronger than those of other schools, but Cain put them all to shame. His strength already eclipsed many adults. This made the student council president an object of intense curiosity for Sain, though his interest lay not in the power he held but how he came to hold it. *How* had Cain become so strong?

Sain’s power as the holy knight had a clear source; it came from a supernatural entity. While being endowed with the goddess’s blessing was effectively a lottery — one for which he’d won the jackpot — the

mechanism of the process was clear and simple. It wasn't hard to understand why an infusion of power from a deity would grant immense strength. The source of Cain's strength, however, was a mystery.

"I said it during the field exercises, and I'll say it again. He's way too strong to be a normal human," remarked Melia.

"But he is. I guarantee he's a normal human," Sain said with certainty. "I mean, I can't imagine he was given that power like I was... which means it truly is his."

It was undoubtedly power he'd gained through hard work. As someone who hadn't worked for his own, Sain knew the difference. He could tell that Cain's strength was real; that wasn't the mystery. What he couldn't tell was how Cain had mustered the willpower to put in so much work. That kind of strength couldn't have come easily. It would have required an intense, persistent effort to toil against the limits of one's own body.

In trying to become the dark knight, Sain had been — and still was — pushing himself with desperate resolve to get stronger. The power Cain displayed must have required at least an equal amount of effort. Despite what was doubtlessly a great deal of natural talent, he probably never rested on his laurels and strove tirelessly to improve. It almost felt like there was some sort of deep-seated hunger for power, and Sain wanted to know why.

"I've got a ton of questions for him, but I doubt he'd answer even one. We're not exactly on speaking terms right now."

"More like you should be avoiding him at all costs, considering he's almost onto you."

In fact, there was a good chance Cain was already sure about Sain's true identity. Ever since the incident during the field exercises, they couldn't walk past each other without the president openly glaring at him. There was never any attempt to initiate conversation, but the constant I've-got-my-eyes-on-you vibe was starting to get to him. Remove the holy knight aspect from Sain, and he'd just be a simple weirdo. While his stunts might draw attention to himself from time to time, there was no reason for anyone to eye him with that kind of alert, scrutinizing gaze. Cain clearly didn't see him in the same way as everyone else. Presumably, that was why the vice president, Emilia, had asked if he knew him. She'd probably noticed his odd behavior around Sain.

Out of the corner of his eye, Sain noticed a dejected Rayde walking out of the arena. A part of him felt glad that he didn't have to greet him; he

wasn't sure what he would say.

"By the way, where are Miss Gold and Miss Grim?"

"They went to get seats for your match."

Sain's second match was coming up next. The knowledge that his friends would be cheering for him was comforting, but the fight between Cain and Rayde lingered uncomfortably in his mind. Maybe he shouldn't have watched it, because now he couldn't help but see himself there. Sure, Sain was desperate to win, but Rayde must have been desperate to win, as well, and look how much that had mattered. He shut his eyes, but it didn't help. The image of Rayde hunched over on his knees, his fists bitterly punching at the ground, seemed to be burned into his retinas.

He could imagine Rayde's anguish... During the field exercises, Rayde seemed to have thought of Cain as a rival... only to have the rivalry proven illusory before being shattered in merciless fashion through a crushing defeat. Sain tried to pull his mind away from the thought, but he kept imagining himself in Rayde's position, faced with an insurmountable hurdle and the devastating realization that all his efforts had been in vain. How could he avoid that? He needed to do something. A rising panic filled his chest.

"Yoink."

Suddenly, he felt Melia's fingers on his cheeks. She pinched them.

"Hm? Wh-What's this supposed to mean?"

"You're thinking yourself into a corner, so I'm making you snap out of it," she said, giving his cheeks a few tugs for good measure. "The only thing you'll find out today is how far you've come. It's just a report card, nothing more. If you win, you can be proud of what you've accomplished. If you lose, you'll know it wasn't enough. Rayde lost because he didn't work hard enough. That's all."

"...That seems a bit extreme, but maybe you're right." He understood what she was trying to say. "I've already come this far. All that's left is to go out there and do my thing."

"That's right."

She gave him a firm nod. He regarded her. The sheer composure she exhibited made him feel a little silly. He shook his head.

"Geez... One would think you should be the one who's nervous right now. You're up against Cain next, you know? What do you make of it? Do you think you can win?"

“Can I win, you say...” She pondered the question for a few seconds. “If I tell you, I feel like you won’t be able to focus on your next match, so I’m going to keep quiet on that for now.”

“Hmph... Well, I guess you have a point.”

Sain’s victory was far from a done deal. He had no business worrying about Melia right now.

“After all, my maid has advanced to her third match. As her master, I can hardly afford to lose here.”

“That’s the attitude. Go show them what you’re made of.”

“I will!”

Feeling pretty good after his pep talk, Sain made his way to the lecture hall-cum-waiting room, where contestants whose matches were starting soon were readying themselves. Unsurprisingly, there were fewer people than when he came for his first match. Furthermore, whereas the atmosphere had been fairly friendly last time, there was now a silent tension in the air. From here on, the contestants would begin to see each other not as fellow participants, but as rivals. A few students were still chatting with each other, but most of them were meditating or doing warm up stretches.

A total of thirty-two students had entered the magic battle expo. For a school that prided itself on valuing raw skill, that might seem rather low, but that was because the magic battle expo was not limited to the intermediate division. Each division had its own tournament. Though Cain had mentioned during the school assembly that this was a valuable opportunity for students to prove their worth to external organizations, that statement only applied to those who had some worth to prove. Stepping into the ring underprepared and suffering a humiliating defeat would surely have the opposite effect. As a result, intermediate division students who weren’t confident in their abilities tended to err on the side of caution, choosing to wait until the senior division, when they might be better prepared. Due to this trend, the senior division magic battle expo saw nearly a hundred participants every year.

While it was possible to graduate from the academy after the intermediate division and immediately enter the workforce, most students intended to advance to the senior division. Since there was still plenty of schooling left to go, they were rarely in any rush to network or market themselves to potential employers. That kind of thing could wait until they were closer to graduation. Therefore, only a minority of students

participated in the magic battle expos of the junior and intermediate divisions. Those who did could largely be split into two categories. They were either the type who was always itching for a fight, or they were exceedingly confident in their own abilities.

The current intermediate division tournament was no different, and its participants were uniform in their excellence. The sixteen who remained after the first set of matches were, therefore, those who already survived a halving of their numbers. From this point on, there would be no easy pickings.

“Hey, loser.”

Sain, who was still trying to get his nerves under control, looked up to find a familiar mop of dark brown hair. He didn’t know the student’s name, but he recognized his face. It was the same guy who’d mocked him when he was registering for the tournament a few days ago.

“Color me surprised. The last thing I expected was to see you in the second round,” he said with a vexing grin.

Unlike last time, his buddies were absent, suggesting that his behavior wasn’t the effect of peer pressure; his disagreeableness came naturally. Sain sighed.

“...What do you want?”

“Huuuh? What, you didn’t check the brackets? Look at who you’re up against next,” the brown-haired student said with a scowl.

Sain examined the tournament chart posted on the wall. His next opponent was someone called Roxas. Though he didn’t know who that was, he put two and two together and figured he was currently staring the fellow in the face.

“I see... So you’re my next opponent.”

“You got it.” Roxas’s grin widened. “You might have fluked your way through your first match, but that’s not gonna work again. I’m gonna beat you down so hard you’ll wish you never stepped into the ring. But hey, don’t blame me, because I warned you. You’re the one who ignored my advice and entered anyway.”

Then, he turned and strutted away, apparently satisfied by the pre-engagement gibe he just delivered. It was a rather aggravating exchange that had completely ruined Sain’s focus, but he had to keep his composure. Roxas might be obnoxious, but he had won his first match. He wasn’t the kind of opponent Sain could defeat by blindly leaning into his anger.

“Seventh match contestants, please get ready!” said a staff member at the entrance of the lecture hall.

“...In a way, I guess this is another trial to overcome,” Sain said to himself as he proceeded toward the arena.

He’d lost track of the number of times he’d been called a loser since coming to this school. Compared to when he’d just arrived, though, he was definitely stronger. The outcome of his first match was undeniable proof of his improvement. His peers, however, didn’t necessarily share the same view. Many of them still saw him as the same bumbling fool they’d known when school first started. He couldn’t just write them all off as a bunch of jerks, either. Not all of them did so out of malice. Many just didn’t know him well enough to think otherwise. Still, if he intended to become the dark knight he was going to have to change their opinion at some point.

That time was now. He needed to shake his loser image, and beating Roxas would surely accomplish that.

The intermediate division’s field was already surrounded by a large number of spectators. Among them were Melia, Alicia, and Marni, whom he quickly smiled at before turning toward Roxas and readying himself for combat.

“Our contestants for the seventh match of the second round will be Sain Fostess and Roxas Bray!”

The bright voice of a female student echoed across the arena.

“They’re in the same year, but they specialize in different kinds of magic! Sain is darkkind, while Roxas is fivekind!”

“Sain hasn’t shown his hand yet. Darkkind tend to employ a lot of unique magic, so I wouldn’t be surprised if he still has a few cards up his sleeve. That’s definitely a point in his favor.”

“Speaking of unique magic, Sain’s first match ended in the blink of an eye, didn’t it? That was a superbly effective surprise attack, but maybe it was also a tactic to avoid showing his hand?”

“Maybe it was. Either way, we’ll find out soon, because that kind of surprise attack isn’t going to work multiple times. Roxas will definitely be ready for it. If Sain wants to win this one, he’ll have to get his hands dirty. Chances are that this is going to be an honest brawl.”

As Sain listened to the analyst’s commentary, he noted that it was both objective and very likely true. If one of them legitimately outclassed the

other in skill, this match was going to make that difference abundantly clear. That was why he couldn't afford to lose.

"On a side note, Sain is known in the intermediate division as the Darkness Dork."

"Who're you calling Darkness Dork?!" he exclaimed and shook his fist in the direction of the female student providing commentary.

What merit was there in disclosing that piece of information right now? It did, however, elicit a round of laughter from the stands, with the junior division students finding it particularly hilarious. For a good while, he continued to hear giggles from some of the younger children.

"Meanwhile, Roxas has a balanced fighting style based on fire and water. While he can't use compound magic, he's very good at controlling each element individually and using them according to their strengths. He's no pushover when it comes to hand-to-hand combat, either."

The analyst, possibly deeming it a tad unfair for Sain to be the only one to suffer an unexpected disclosure of personal information, offered some details on his opponent as well. Taken as a whole, it suggested that while Roxas seemed like a pretty headstrong guy, he was a careful fighter in the ring. His affinity for fire and water magic made him similar to Melia. It would, Sain figured, be like fighting a downgraded version of Melia, just without her compound magic and judicious boldness and extensive battlefield experience and—

He reconsidered. Comparing a regular student to Melia was doing his maid a disservice.

Sain studied his opponent. Roxas also carried a sword at his waist, but judging by his build and musculature, he was going to employ a fighting style that primarily relied on magic.

"By the way," the commentator continued, "Roxas's grades are some of the best among the intermediate first years. He's been participating in the battle expo since his junior days, and he's gone as far as the semifinals in the past. As for Sain... Hmm, it looks like it'll be an uphill battle. This is your time, Sain! Let's see what you're made of!"

Sain pressed his lips together and tightened his fists. This was indeed his time, and he had every intention of showing them what he was made of.

"Let's start the countdown!"

As numbers started flashing on the large screen in front of him, Sain closed his eyes and took in a deep breath. People still called him names like

“loser” or “Darkness Dork,” and he would still snap back at them, but nowadays, that was more performance than honest anger. Frankly, it didn’t really bother him that much, anymore. That was what scared him. If he got used to failure, then what did he have left?

No, he was not a failure. At least, he wouldn’t remain one. He was going to become the dark knight. With his conviction reaffirmed, he opened his eyes and fixed them on his opponent just as the countdown reached zero.

“Let the match begin!”

Sain and Roxas began to circle each other warily, keeping their gazes locked and the distance between them even. For a while, they traded feints, each probing the other’s reaction. Then, Sain struck the first blow.

“Darku!”

A black bullet shot out of his palm. It sped toward Roxas, who dodged it with ease.

“Hah! Get your kiddie spells out of there! This is the big boys’ arena!”

Roxas swiveled on his feet and charged down the field, closing the gap between them at breakneck speed.

He wants a swordfight? Wait, no—

Sain glanced at Roxas’s waist as he bore down on him. Seeing that the sword remained untouched, he quickly hopped out of his opponent’s path.

“Flare Shot!”

Flames erupted from Roxas’s palm in a scattershot pattern.

“Ugh!”

They spread out as they flew, widening the attack’s coverage. Thanks to his timely evasion, Sain took only a glancing hit. It wasn’t fatal, but it still hurt, and he winced as his left shoulder and back flared with pain. He stumbled a few steps and went down to his knees.

“Whoa, whoa, big guy, careful there. Don’t trip over yourself,” Roxas sneered as Sain got back onto his feet. “The match has barely started and you’re already close to tapping out? Come on, you gotta try harder than that. There are people watching this, and they wanna see a good show.”

Roxas shot a haughty glance at the spectators. Sain didn’t follow suit. Instead, he kept his eyes on Roxas.

“If you think...” Sain said, his voice raspy and strained.

“Eh?”

“If you think... that I’ll always be the same loser, then you are very wrong!”

He kicked the ground and lunged forward, moving into melee range. In the process, he looked hard at Roxas’s arms — specifically, the angle of his palms. Most spells start at the palms. So long as he kept track of where they were pointed, he could predict the trajectory of his spells.

“You dumbass! You think you can just tackle me?”

Roxas laughed as he opened his right palm.

Here it comes!

Sain’s hand shot to his waist, pulled up his sword — sheath and all — and placed it in the path of Roxas’s attack.

“Eat more fire! *Flare Shot!* ”

A second salvo flew at him. Dozens of pellets traced red hot trails through the air like flaming rubies. They grew bigger at alarming speed in his view as they came straight for his head, but he didn’t stop. His fingers tightened around the hilt of his sword.

“Hngh!”

He repelled the pellets with the scabbard of his sword.

“What?!”

This caught Roxas by surprise, who had expected his spell to stop Sain in his tracks. *Flare Shot* was fast and had a large area of effect, making it very difficult to dodge. Its downside, however, was that each individual pellet was fairly weak. When facing it head on, blocking worked better than dodging.

Unprepared for Sain’s determined approach, Roxas was a tad late to react.

“*Darku!* ”

With his sword knocked off course by a colliding pellet, Sain held up his empty hand and launched a bullet of darkness at his opponent.

“Y-Yowza!”

Roxas narrowly avoided getting hit by jerking his head away. He stumbled back a few steps before sneering again.

“Hah! Nice try, but your little darts can’t hurt me!”

Sain chose not to point out that they clearly could, considering that Roxas almost gave himself whiplash trying to avoid it. Beginner-level spells like *Darku* lacked both speed and power, but they weren’t the kind of thing one could take to the face and shrug off. A direct hit was still potent

enough to stagger. That would have created an opening, allowing Sain to follow up with his sword, but he hadn't quite hit the jackpot there.

Roxas backed away, putting some distance between them before unleashing a larger spell.

“Orb of fire, purge with raging flames — Flare!”

The Alicia special. Like *Flare Shot*, it was also fire magic, but that was where the similarities ended. This time, a single, massive fireball flared into existence. It was hot and dense, and parrying it was not an option.

“Try blocking this!” shouted Roxas as he threw the fireball at Sain.

Seeing that his prior quantity-based attack had failed, Roxas immediately switched to quality. Like the commentators had mentioned before the match, he did indeed have a solid, balanced approach to fighting.

Sain kept his calm and held out his hands at the fiery threat. In the month since the field exercises, he and Marni had continued their training. Not a day went by where he didn't practice his dark magic.

“Orb of gloom, devour with shadow and darkness...” Black particles gathered in his palms. *“Dardia!”*

A large black orb rivaling the fireball in size appeared before Sain.

“What?!”

Again, Roxas stared in disbelief as the two spheres collided. Flames thrashed against the darkness, their efforts ultimately futile as the black energy slowly wrapped around the fireball, swallowing it like a gaping maw. The orb of gloom shrank steadily as it digested its blazing opposite number. Bright flares continued to erupt like devoured prey fighting for survival, but even this eventually ceased, and both spheres vanished together. In the end, the two spells canceled each other out. This made Roxas roar with rage.

“You... loser! You're a damn loser! You think you're as good as me?!”

Angry veins bulged in his temples as he threw another round of *Flare Shot* at Sain. In his fury, he failed to take proper aim and his shots flew wide, allowing Sain to evade it with ease.

It's not hard to push this guy's buttons, is it?

Sain was pretty sure he knew exactly why Roxas was furious. The fact that their orbs canceled each other out suggested they were equal in power, which in turn implied that their casters were an equal match, as well. For Roxas, who'd been looking down on Sain all this time, that was not a pill he could swallow. So, he got mad.

I've got nothing to fear from him.

Confidence welled up within Sain. The hurdle represented by Roxas, which had seemed so high, now felt much smaller, and he knew with absolute certainty that he could clear it. They'd thrown themselves against each other, and in doing so, discovered how strong each of them truly were. Roxas did indeed employ a balanced fighting style, but that also meant he was, for all intents and purposes, a jack of all trades, master of none. He had no trump card, no big spell that could seal the deal in one go. Granted, most people didn't have something like that; it was Sain who was out of the norm in that regard.

I guess I just happen to know a bunch of people who do. Not sure if that's a good thing, but anyway...

"Orb of fire, purge with raging flames — Flare! "

Roxas switched back to the fireball, but again it failed to find its mark. *Flare's* enhanced power also required a longer casting time. Previously, Sain wasn't able to get out of the way in time, forcing him to defend against it head on. This time, he was ready.

Alicia's magic is so much stronger .

He sidestepped the oncoming fireball. Though they both used fire magic, hers was on another level. Fireballs from her were hot enough to burn someone half to death just by grazing them, and she could throw those out nonstop. Compared to Alicia's, Roxas's spell was like child's play.

As the comparatively lukewarm fireball flew toward him, he rolled out of the way and counterattacked.

"Darku! "

"Ugh?!"

The dark bullet slammed into Roxas's shoulder, causing him to stagger. Sain immediately closed the distance and drew his sword. A series of diagonal slashes forced Roxas to keep moving, preventing him from casting another spell.

"Damn it! You little—"

Roxas drew his own sword and there was a sharp clank as their weapons met. Perhaps melee combat made for better entertainment, or maybe it was just rare in the magic battle expo. Either way, the clash drew a wave of excited commotion from the crowd. Neither contestant, however, was particularly adept at close-quarters combat.

Sain was no stranger to the sword; he used it often when fighting as the holy knight. Nevertheless, his actual skill was amateurish at best. With the blessing of the goddess supercharging him, it didn't really matter how he swung the thing; it was going to cut through whatever it touched anyway. He had never trained properly in swordsmanship. Roxas showed no signs of any particular expertise either, suggesting he was in a similar boat. Even so, he demonstrated a basic grasp of the techniques required to keep an opponent at bay.

“Hyaah!”

Sain brought his sword down in an overhead swing. When it was blocked, he immediately crouched and pulled his sword around for a rightward sweep. Roxas reacted accordingly and pointed his sword downwards to parry it.

“Don't get too cocky!”

Roxas lunged forward for a wide horizontal slash. When Sain leapt backwards to avoid it, he quickly followed up with a spell.

“Spirits of turbid water, grasp what you seek — Wortá Halden!”

This time, it was water magic. The spell produced watery arms that rose from the ground and grabbed foes, restricting their movement. Melia had used it before, but again, Roxas lacked her finesse.

Melia's magic is so much more accurate.

There was a refined efficiency to the way Melia used this spell. It pursued its target with deadly precision, lashing out at the exact moment when it was most difficult to escape. Even if the target avoided capture, there was always another arm coming. When she used magic, it was both skillful and calculated.

Countless arms slid across the ground at his legs. Sain waited for them to get close before leaping into the air and pointing his hand down.

“Darku Shot!”

A cluster of dark pellets struck the swarm of watery arms. He landed just after the last arm was destroyed, breathing heavily but still unharmed. Roxas gnashed his teeth at him. The more they fought, the better they understood the extent of each other's abilities. Roxas possessed neither Alicia's fight-ending clinchers nor Melia's tactical prowess. His balanced approach extended only to his magic, not his overall capability in battle.

Objectively, nothing had changed. Sain still couldn't afford to lose, and the match still rested on a knife's edge. The slightest lapse in concentration

could spell disaster. The stakes were as high as ever, but somehow, Sain's spirits were even higher. He'd never been in a battle where the odds had been so even.

So this is what a real fight feels like.

"You damn loser!"

Roxas roared again as water gathered in his hand and lashed out in a sharp crescent. It was a spell Sain hadn't seen before, but he was pretty sure a direct hit was going to leave a nasty gash. He wasn't worried though; he had this sword. Just as he'd done against *Flare Shot*, he blocked the spell with the body of the blade.

Marni's magic is so much scarier.

He recalled his mentor, whose masterful control over dark magic put him to shame. Her spells always had an enigmatic quality to them, unbound by the frameworks they were taught in school. They were unconventional and therefore disorienting, which was why every time she used a new spell during their training, he'd been left hopelessly vulnerable, suffering strike after strike until he learned to evade it through sheer experience. In comparison, Roxas's spells were lifted straight out of the textbook. For Sain, who spent almost all his days learning magic, they were laughably predictable.

"Let's gooooo!"

He raised his sword and charged boldly toward Roxas. What moved him wasn't arrogance, but a sense that he could now see to the bottom of his opponent's well of potential, and it wasn't that far down. So long as he remained focused and composed, he could deal with Roxas's magic.

"Y-You little—"

Roxas hastily swung his sword up.

"Too late!"

Sain's sword flashed first. There was a loud clang, and the opposing blade soared through the air in a wide arc.

"Orb of gloom, devour with shadow and darkness..."

"Eep!"

He thrust his arm out at a defenseless Roxas and, ignoring his squeal of terror, pushed as much power as he could into his spell.

"Dardia!"



“Gyaaaaah!”

The orb of darkness slammed into Roxas, sending him flying. He landed on his back, but the momentum flipped him over and kept him rolling. Eventually, he came to a stop face down as a pale blue barrier expanded around him. His substitute pendant had not survived the impact.

“That’s it! The match is over!” shouted the commentator. “Defying expectations, Sain Fostess has emerged the winner!”

The commentators had, of course, considered Roxas the favorite, meaning he’d just supplied them with an unexpected twist to the storyline.

“What a nail-biter that was! Listen to the crowd! They loved it!”

“It got me sweating, too. The two contestants were evenly matched and it was a very close fight. Thank you to both of them for putting on such a great show.”

A wave of fatigue rolled through Sain, and the commentators’ voices seemed to grow distant. He dropped to his knees and pressed his hands to the ground to support himself, his breath coming in labored gasps. Sweat pooled on the ground in front of his face. Sheer adrenaline had kept him going during the match, and he’d pushed himself to the very limit. Now, with the tension gone, he’d started feeling the consequences. He could feel the blood rushing through his temples, its rhythmic flow beating against his skull like war drums. The sound was so loud that he could barely hear the audience cheering. His vision swam, and it took an effort of will to avoid collapsing on the spot.

None of that could hold back the rush of triumph.

“What do you think was the deciding factor of that match?”

“I don’t think there was a single deciding factor. Both contestants gave it their all, and since they were evenly matched, it ended up being very close. If I had to pick something... it would probably be raw ability. One of them was just overall a stronger fighter than the other.”

“Raw ability, you say...”

The female commentator repeated the other’s words, her voice slightly tense. This time, Sain hadn’t gone for a surprise attack nor had he pulled some sort of eye-popping trump card out of his hat. He fought an honest match, and he won. The implications of that were *massive*.

The male student who served as the analyst looked directly at Sain as he voiced his thoughts.

“At this point, I think we have no choice but to accept the reality... that Sain truly is the dark horse of this tournament. I’d imagine that intermediate division students in the stands are now seeing him in a very different light. Sain had always stood out as a rather eccentric individual, what with the way he acts and dresses, but until now, he’d never been seen as particularly competent.”

“His antics sure did make him stick out like a sore thumb. But you think that image will start changing now?”

“Yes, I do think he’ll start standing out for a different reason, now. Frankly, I didn’t think he’d be this strong, either, but the match we just witnessed served as a resounding refutation of our prior expectations. Going forward into the third round, I think people will need to start considering him a threat. Take him on without a plan, and you might come to regret it.”

Slowly, the deafening beats of his own heart softened, and the sound of applause entered his ears. He was still breathing heavily, and every muscle in his body ached, but he forced it out of his mind to relish the moment. He’d won. It’d taken so much out of him that he thought he was going to pass out, but he’d won. Never more would he be a loser. He’d shed the name. A wave of heat struck the back of his nose, and his vision blurred. In the teary haze, he saw the figures of three girls who’d offered him their friendship.

Melia. Alicia. Marni.

He was overcome by gratitude. Meeting them was the best thing to have ever happened to him. Had they not lent him their time and energy to help him improve, he’d never have defeated Roxas. Marni’s words resurfaced in his mind.

“None of us here thinks you’re weak. Not anymore.”

He’d trusted her. And how glad he was to have done so.

“Damn it...”

Sain blinked away the tears to find Roxas, who was slowly climbing to his feet, glaring at him with furious hatred in his eyes.

“This isn’t over, you little shit...”

It had been a good match. Everyone, from the commentators to the audience, probably had a favorable opinion of the fight. Nevertheless, there was some bitterness from the way it concluded. Roxas, who came into the match feeling vastly superior to his opponent, had suffered what was undoubtedly a humiliating defeat at the hands of someone he considered a

loser. That must have severely dented his pride. Sain would have preferred to shake hands and end the match on a positive note, but ultimately, no such opportunity presented itself and they left the arena without trading any words.

“Sain!”

As he approached the stands, he saw Alicia running eagerly toward him.

“You did it! Nobody’s going to call you a loser after seeing that!” she exclaimed, beaming at him as though it’d been her who won. Her exuberance proved infectious, and he grinned back.

“Yeah. I’m not going to lie. I’m feeling pretty good right now. It’s as if all my hard work finally paid off.”

“It *did* pay off,” Marni affirmed as she walked up beside Alicia. “The old Sain would have been completely outclassed by Roxas. But you put in the work, and you tipped the scales. Congratulations. I’m... happy for you, too.”

“Thank you, Miss Grim... No, Master!” he exclaimed, touched by the compliment. Coming from her, whose attitude usually defaulted to cold disinterest, that meant a lot.

He then looked to the third girl to appear.

“Maid, it appears that our showdown is drawing ever closer.”

“I guess it is, Master Sain. To be honest, I thought for sure you were going to lose that one.”

“Mwahaha! Too bad for you! I’m on a roll right now, and I’m going to roll right through you, too! Just watch me!”

“Hmmm? Is that... baseless confidence I hear?”

Melia showed him the kind of smile that was definitely meant to be interpreted as a threat. He whimpered a little and retracted his statement.

“U-Uh... Y-You know what? Maybe I’m not on such a roll after all! Haha!”

Alicia rolled her eyes and muttered, “Why talk so big if you’re going to immediately take it back?”

“Still, let’s not get ahead of ourselves here,” Melia said in a more sober tone. “We both have another match left to go, and I’m pretty sure it’s going to be a big one for both of us.”

Her warning pulled his head back down from the clouds. She was right; the tournament wasn’t over. The thought of their next opponents put the

stopper on his exhilaration.

“Melia’s next opponent is the president, and Sain’s up against Yuria, huh...” said Alicia as she studied the brackets. “There sure are a lot of familiar faces now that we’re entering the third round.”

For those like Alicia, who’d been here since the junior division, the students who made it to the upper echelons of the tournament rankings were all more or less household names. It hardly needed to be said that the student council president, Cain, was a formidable opponent, but Yuria, the younger of the Eldis twins, was no slouch, either. This time, though, mixed in with the usual crowd were Sain and Melia, whose presence this late in the brackets must have been quite odd for regulars of the magic battle expo.

“The third round is tomorrow, right?” asked Sain.

“Yeah. They finish up to the first half of the second round on day one. Day two is the second half of the second round and all of the third round. The final day is only the semifinals and the grand finals,” explained Alicia.

“Which means Maid and I are both done for the day, huh... Well, this is sort of an awkward time to finish.”

It was one o’clock in the afternoon, right when the festival was really getting busy. The expo wasn’t just a nonstop marathon of matches from morning to night. In order to allow the contestants to enjoy the festival, the matches were concentrated in the middle of the day, from late morning to early afternoon. In fact, most of the matches on day one finished in the morning.

“Let’s go get some food first,” suggested Alicia. “The two of you haven’t eaten yet, right? Sain can probably use some rest, too.”

“Yeah, I would appreciate some cooldown time.”

Even lengthier matches tended to finish in under ten minutes, so Sain hadn’t actually been moving around for all that long. They demanded a lot of energy in a short time, but total stamina drain was limited, so recovery was quick as well. It was the mental fatigue that lingered, which was why Sain was hoping for a longer period of rest.

“We’ll let you rest up first, but once you feel better, let’s go look around the vendor booths. Marni and I found a couple of interesting ones,” said Alicia.

He nodded.

“Sure thing. We can spend the whole afternoon exploring the festival.”

The expo wasn't all about fighting; there was plenty of entertainment. Like Alicia, Sain had also been looking forward to wandering through the mazes of booths and doing some window shopping. With their plans for the rest of the day decided, Melia raised her hand.

"I'll have to be excused for a moment. There's something I need to deal with."

Alicia gave her a surprised look.

"Huh? Really?"

"It won't take long, so I'll meet up with you later. I'd appreciate it if we could decide on a meeting spot."

"Hm, how's the courtyard in the intermediate division school building, then? While you deal with your thing, we'll go pick up some lunch at the stalls. Then, we'll meet up with you and we can eat together."

There were a few restaurants where they could sit down, but the roadside stalls also offered more than enough variety for a satisfying lunch. Alicia and Marni both nodded. Seeing that everyone was in agreement, Melia nodded as well and got up.

"All right, off I go, then," she said before strolling off toward the main building that housed the staff office and cafeteria.

"I wonder what it is that she has to deal with..." Alicia mused as she watched Melia go. "Any idea, Sain?"

"Nope. No idea."

"Huh. I thought you would, considering the whole master and attendant thing. I guess you've got some sort of respect-each-other's-boundaries thing going?"

"Eh, not exactly..."

In fact, his boundaries were constantly being intruded upon. Back when they were in Lightridge, every aspect of his daily life was arguably under Melia's control. He wore the clothes she prepared, ate the food she cooked, and lived under the same roof as her. Day after day, he spent almost every waking moment with her from the time he woke up to the time he fell asleep.

Now, things were different. It was probably because their circumstances had changed.

"It's not like before. Now, Maid is a student of this academy. Yes, she's my attendant, but she's also a student, just like the rest of us... And as time

goes on, it's only normal for her to have her own private life that I don't know about."

In a way, it almost made him proud, and he couldn't help but cross his arms and look with distant eyes at Melia's shrinking form like a parent seeing his beloved daughter off. Alicia looked at the expression on his face and pressed her lips together.

"You... really aren't very possessive, are you, Sain? And I mean that in both the good way and the bad way."

"Hm? I know what the good way is supposed to mean, but what's the bad way?"

"It means... you should probably try a little harder to figure out how girls think. Right, Marni?"

"...Agreed."

Sain scratched his head. For all it was worth to him, they might as well have been speaking another language.

"Okay, come on. Let's go pick up some lunch before Melia gets back," said Alicia as she got up and led them toward the food stalls.

With most of the matches concluded, people flocked to the booths out in the school grounds. A mishmash of students and guests roamed in every direction, weaving past each other toward whatever food or activity caught their interest. Some guests wore costumes complete with replica swords and armor to fit the battle expo theme. Sain was wondering where they'd found all those elaborate props, only to walk past a booth that sold exactly those articles.

"...Is it just me, or do they sell literally everything under the sun here?" he murmured.

"It's not the first time I've heard someone say that," answered Alicia.

People were free to enjoy the festival however they wished, so long as they weren't being a nuisance to other guests. Staff were on hand to deal with troublemakers who, high off the thrill of a particularly intense match, would end up brawling. Adults and children alike were guilty of such conduct, with everything from fisticuffs to replica weapons being employed. It was mostly senior division students who were in charge of breaking up such altercations, and things usually calmed down once they arrived on the scene. Presumably, the academy's reputation had a big role to play in these cases, as even adults would think twice before defying a sternly worded warning from older Jenifa students.

“Speaking of which, Sain, what’s Melia’s favorite food?” asked Alicia as she browsed the rows of stalls around them.

“You know, you’d probably never guess from how she looks, but Maid’s actually into some pretty niche stuff.”

“Niche? Like what?”

“Like, say... Smoked seafood.”

“...That *is* pretty niche.”

Melia had an inclination to take the kind of stuff forty-year-olds would order with beer at a bar and quietly nibble on them with the daintiness of a princess. She’d never acknowledged it openly, but Sain suspected that it was something of a guilty pleasure of hers. Those times when she got to sit down and enjoy some fine smoked seafood by herself were probably paradise for her. Fortunately — or unfortunately, depending on how you looked at it — there just so happened to be a stall selling that very thing. Naturally, they picked up a few pieces for Melia. Just then, there was a voice from the crowd.

“Ahh!”

Sain turned in its direction to find a young child pointing excitedly at him.

“It’s Mister Darkness Dork!” exclaimed his pint-sized fan.

This caused five more tiny figures to pop out of the throng of people and join the first one in encircling him, their eyes sparkling with starstruck enthusiasm.

“Look, look! It really is him!”

“Wow!”

He gave them a nervous smile.

“U-Uh... The mister is a nice touch, I guess?”

Alicia gave him a good-natured smirk.

“Didn’t you notice all the fans you were gaining during your last match? The junior students were all rooting for you.”

He definitely hadn’t noticed. Granted, he did vaguely remember hearing a lot of what sounded like children’s laughter when the female commentator had called him Darkness Dork.

“Hmmm... So you understand the appeal of this ominous aura of mine. Well, well, it looks like we have ourselves a couple of prodigies here.”

Feeling rather pleased with himself, he looked down at the children with a benevolent smile. They giggled loudly amongst themselves before

shouting things at him in turn.

“Ahaha! Mister Darkness Dork!”

“Eww, what’s that stuff you’re wearing?”

“Dork! Dork!”

“That sounds so dumb! You’re dumb!”

It didn’t take long for their comments to degenerate into straight up insults. Sain gave Alicia a flat look.

“So, rooting for me, huh?”

“Okay, well, they had a lot of fun watching you, at least.” She looked at the snickering children and grimaced a little. “But maybe some of it was at your expense.”

They seemed particularly fascinated with his black coat and, despite his admonitions, kept trying to get their grubby little hands on it. His coat was imbued with slightly dangerous materials to seal in the blessing of the goddess, and for the children, touching the inner lining could prove harmful. In the end, their undeterred enthusiasm forced him to compromise by yielding to their desire but also issuing a stern warning to poke only at the outside of his coat.

“Mister Darkness Dork, are these your girlfriends?!” asked a little girl who pointed at Alicia and Marni.

Sain, without any hint of hesitation, answered, “No, they certainly are not.”

“No way!”

“Boring!”

That elicited a mix of responses, some shocked and others disappointed. The not-girlfriends in question regarded the proceedings with slightly sullen expressions.

“...You know, the way he just denied that outright is, honestly, a little upsetting.”

“...Yeah, he didn’t even have to think about that one.”

Their grumbling reached Sain’s ears, and he grimaced.

What am I supposed to say then, damn it?

When the children’s initial burst of excitement began to wane, one of them walked up to him and said, “Um, can I ask you a question?”

Sain turned to find a boy with wide, innocent eyes.

“Sure, go for it.”

“How come they call you Darkness Dork?” the boy asked in a tone of genuine curiosity.

Sain grinned.

“Hoh. Good question. They call me that, you see, because I am a denizen of darkness.”

“Of... darkness?”

“Indeed. A deep darkness swirls within me, grimmer than the underworld and blacker than the abyss...”

The boy’s eyes widened and he audibly gulped.

“Grimmer than the underworld... and blacker than the abyss...”

“Stop pulling innocent kids into your nonsense!”

“Ow!”

Sain yelped as Alicia smacked him on the back of his head. She then knelt down and clutched the boy’s shoulders.

“Don’t listen to what strangers tell you, okay? Especially not weird strangers like him!”

“Yeah,” Marni added. “You’ll end up stupid like him.”

While the two girls were trying to undo the effects of Sain’s influence, he rubbed at the tender spot on his head and grumbled, “Geez, a few more of those and I *will* end up stupid...”

Alicia silenced him with a glare before letting out an exasperated sigh.

“Come on,” she said as she stood back up. “Let’s go get our lunch already so we don’t keep Melia waiting.”

Marni nodded before frowning.

“What about drinks, then?”

“Oh, I forgot about that. But I mean, we can probably just get something at the school store. We’re coming back here after lunch anyway, right?”

“...True.”

While the two girls conversed, Sain and the boy had locked eyes again.

“Um, Mister, do you think... there’s darkness in me too?”

“Yes, there is darkness in everyone. But few can learn to wield it, and fewer yet can truly master it. Those who do... are the chosen ones, destined to rule the great abyss beyond...”



“Rule... the great abyss beyond!”

“Should you one day find yourself being consumed by the darkness within, come to me. I shall release the power sealed within this right arm of mine, and show you my true form — that of the Lord of Darkness. It will take me little effort to subjugate a paltry darkness such as yours.”

“The power sealed in the right arm... of the Lord of Darkness!”

“I said quit it already!”

There was another resounding *smack* as Alicia slapped him across the head.

While Sain was touring the stalls with the two girls, Melia was making her way toward the main school building, which was open to the public during the battle expo. On the first floor of the building was an information center with associated consultation booths displaying a plethora of pamphlets from Jenifa.

She drew some odd gazes as she walked, presumably because her maid uniform was a rare sight, but the gazes disappeared once she circled around to the back of the building. Whereas its front entrance had been bustling, its rear was far more secluded. She approached what looked like a storage room.

“Piece of sh... That los...”

“Yo, calm... Rox...”

In the shadow of the structure, some students were whispering to each other. They were just out of earshot, so she held her breath and crept a little closer.

“Anyway, that loser needs to learn a lesson... so I’m gonna teach him one. And it’s gonna hurt.”

One of the speakers was Sain’s second opponent in the tournament, Roxas. Surrounding him were a number of his flunkies. After their match concluded, Melia had caught a whiff of trouble from Roxas. Something wasn’t right about the way he’d glared at Sain. Figuring his hatred might boil over into a misguided attempt at violence, she’d decided to check on him in secret.

The current holy knight, Sain, was a person with the purest of hearts. When he’d been acting as the holy knight, his magnanimous personality had earned him the trust and reverence of many. At times, however, his innocence had also endangered him when bad people tried to use it against

him. It was Melia's job to keep her master safe from such situations, and she'd suspected Roxas of being up to no good when she witnessed him circling behind the building, so she excused herself from the group to follow him. Turns out, he was indeed up to no good.

"But Roxas, what're you gonna *do* , exactly?"

"Doesn't matter, as long as it's fast and painful... We gotta get this done fast. It's gonna be a lot harder tomorrow."

Rage bubbled in his voice as he spoke. At the same time, there was the sound of metallic objects grinding against each other.

"Lucky for us, we got plenty of weapons."

"H-Holy— Roxas, where did you get these?"

"They're weapons you can borrow for the tournament. I took a few from the storehouse."

His flunkies proceeded to examine the weapons as they spoke.

"So, how about we pick a good place, get him to go there, and then pile on him and beat his face in?"

"Sounds good to me. As for the place... Here'll do fine," said Roxas, agreeing to the suggestion. "Don't use magic. It draws too much attention. Stick to the weapons. And make it hurt."

"Got it. Heh... This oughta teach that dumbass to act up."

"Yeah, it'll be good punishment. Arrogant losers need to be put in their place, after all."

They might be a bunch of thugs, but they were a motivated bunch, and if she let them be, it wouldn't be long before they started going after Sain. She was going to have to take care of this right here, right now. With her mind made up, she stepped out into the open.

"I'm terribly sorry to disturb you while you're busy doing the scheming villain thing, but could you... I don't know, maybe just knock it off?"

Her sudden appearance shocked the conniving crew. There were three of them — the exact same trio that had harassed Sain when he was registering for the tournament a week ago.

"You... You're that loser's maid, aren't you?!" he screamed with fury.

"Oh shit, Roxas, what do we do?"

"This girl was pretty damn strong..."

The two flunkies started to panic, but Roxas remained calm and picked up his sword nearby.

"Keep it together! There's three of us. We can take her!"

Reassured by his words, they composed themselves and each took a weapon.

“Ugh, nothing is ever simple, is it?” Melia said with a tsk.

She had hoped to resolve things peacefully, but the three armed thugs baring their teeth at her made that seem unlikely. Her eyes narrowed, and she simultaneously observed all three of them, waiting to see how they would move.

“Move around her! And keep her surrounded! But don’t get too hasty to fight!”

His two buddies obediently spread out toward her flanks.

“Wow, now that’s playing dirty,” she said as they surrounded her from three sides.

“Hmph! You won’t be talking for much longer. But don’t blame me, ’cause you’re the one who walked into this!” he roared as he came at her with his sword raised, choosing physical brutality over magic to avoid attracting attention.

After watching a whole match between him and Sain, Melia already knew some of his tendencies in melee combat, and she easily dodged his strike before sweeping his legs out from under him with a kick.

“Augh!”

He fell backwards and landed on his rear. In an effort to help their leader, his two buddies mounted a concerted attack, but her magic beat them to it.

“Sprites of crystalline veil, roam the endless mist — Londo Mysteria.”
White mist filled the area.

“Wh-What the hell?!”

“Mist?!”

It was an example of compound magic using fire and water, which was Melia’s forte. Compound magic was usable only by fivekind, and even then, only a handful of them. It was very likely that none of the three thugs had ever witnessed this spell before. Trapped in its hazy shroud, they could do nothing but thrash about in confusion.

“Eugh!”

She swung her hand like a blade at the closest figure, hitting him in the back of the neck. He fell to the ground.

“Gyaah!”

She did the same to the figure opposite him, who went down as well.

“Shit! You freak—”

A gust of wind cleared the haze, revealing two unconscious forms and a flustered Roxas. He took in the scene. Then, he immediately spun on his heels and made a run for it. Melia rolled her eyes.

“Oh, come on. Do you really think I’ll let you get away?”

All things considered, he might just be desperate enough to make one last-ditch attempt to hurt Sain. As a self-respecting maid, she wasn’t going to risk any harm befalling her master. In his panic, Roxas tripped over a hump on the ground and fell, giving her a chance to easily catch up. She quickly dashed up to him to finish the job...

“Auuuugh!”

...Only to watch in surprise as a radiant orb slammed into Roxas. There was a short but brilliant burst of light. Then, he went flying into the wall of the nearby building, hitting it with a loud *thump* before falling back down to the ground, unconscious.

“Um...”

Bewildered by the sudden development, Melia frowned with uncertainty at the new figure who’d appeared before her.

“I guess I should say thank you?”

A pair of leonine eyes gazed back at her.

“That is unnecessary,” said Cain Theresia. “The student council received a report from the tournament staff about some weapons being taken without permission. I simply disciplined the perpetrator. That is all.”

Then, he studied her more closely.

“You... are Melia. My next opponent, correct?”

“Wow, I’m honored that you know my name.”

Despite her calm front, Melia was actually shocked that Cain knew who she was. He was *the* celebrity of the school — stronger and more imposing than everyone else. Compared to him, she should have been just another student. Even if she was his next opponent, she still hadn’t thought that he’d have been able to identify her with one look. Perhaps it was a side effect of his interest in her master.

“I’ve been watching you for some time, and I find it intriguing that your abilities seem to far outstrip those of a mere student.”

“...Seriously? When’s the last time you looked in a mirror?”

“Hmph. I am an exception. My strength is the result of... *circumstances*,” he said, making it very clear through his tone that he would be providing

no further explanation. “But you’re also strong... and that’s why your actions puzzle me. Why would someone of your caliber insist on devoting yourself to that Sain Fostess? Your loyalty runs far deeper than that of a mere attendant. What is it that draws you to him?”

“Good question. Let’s just say I have my *circumstances* as well.”

She responded in kind. He narrowed his eyes at her.

“Circumstances... such as being in service to the holy knight?”

He drew no reaction from her. She was stunned, of course, but after seeing his recent behavior around Sain, some part of her had expected this to happen at some point. That sliver of prescience allowed her to keep up her poker face in the moment.

“Holy knight? I’m not sure I understand what you’re talking about.”

“There’s no need to play dumb. I can put two and two together. Those outrageous trinkets he covers himself with... those are all light magic seals, aren’t they? Admittedly, their identity is well-masked by their rather eccentric forms, but they don’t stand up to close scrutiny. The functional aspects of their design are identical to regular seals you can find on the market. I assume he had them specially made to hide their true purpose... but he should have gone further. Instead, his efforts have been rendered futile by his own sloppiness.”

Melia pressed her lips together, holding back the urge to simultaneously laugh and grimace. Cain’s reasoning was sound. Too sound, in fact, because it made a lot more sense than why Sain *actually* wore them. He correctly surmised that Sain had his seals specially made to conceal their purpose, but they could have been made to look like anything. The reason they ended up looking so outrageous was nothing more than personal preference. Sain just had terrible taste. Why else would anyone willingly cover themselves in those things?

The look in Cain’s eyes suggested that he was absolutely confident in his deduction, and he had every right to be, since — aesthetics rationale notwithstanding — his theory was otherwise entirely correct. By carefully analyzing a variety of information — including the bit about the seals — he’d pieced together by himself the fact that Sain was the holy knight. Figuring that he was long past the point of being fooled, she sighed and dropped the act.

“...Wow, you sure did your research, didn’t you? Would you like a cookie?”

A smile crept across his lips.

“I’m the student council president. Investigating students who engage in suspicious activity is part of my job.”

Then, the smile faded, and he fixed her with a grim, scrutinizing glare again.

“I have one question for you. Those things he says... Does he mean them? Is he serious about becoming the dark knight?”

“Hmmm, I’m pretty sure he’s serious.”

“So he is... Hmph, how asinine.” He snorted disdainfully. “He bears the mantle of the holy knight, yet strives to become the dark knight? Such absurdity boggles the mind. It’s little more than foolish debauchery — the ludicrous quest of a depraved noble determined to squander his undeserved wealth. Unbridled fancies are but a farce, and this is the greatest of them all.”

His voice dripped with scorn. Melia listened but didn’t speak. Her only reactions were a slight crease across her brow and a tightening of her jaw. They did not escape his notice.

“I see you take issue with what I said.”

“...Am I supposed to be delighted that you’re insulting my master?”

“If you find my words distasteful, then I apologize. I mean no offense. I have simply stated the truth,” he said, his voice devoid of any hint of apology or regret.

A rare fury began to build within Melia. Sain didn’t go around telling everyone why he wanted to become the dark knight; he kept his motivations to himself. Cain might have deduced much of the truth, but even he couldn’t be privy to Sain’s innermost thoughts. Cain’s anger was, therefore, justifiable... but only to a degree. Anyone else, knowing only that Sain was eschewing his privilege as the holy knight to become the dark knight, would have the same reaction.

That didn’t make her any less angry, though. Ever since Sain had set out on his quest, she’d been with him every step of the way. She’d seen the effort he’d put in. He’d always been a hard worker — almost in spite of himself — who labored toward his goals with a doggedness that few others could muster. The blood and sweat he’d expended along the way were immeasurable. Even in Jenifa, she doubted that there was a single student who worked harder than him, and all that hard work was finally starting to pay off. Sain’s efforts were no unbridled fancy, much less a farce. Cain

Theresia might be peerlessly skilled, but he'd insulted Sain. Regardless of how strong he was, she wasn't going to take that laying down. Trying hard to keep her tone civil, she looked him in the eye.

"...Let me give you some friendly advice," she said, her voice not at all friendly. "I intend on winning tomorrow, so if I were you, I'd tread carefully around me... because it's going to affect how badly you lose."

That drew a reaction from him. He regarded her, eyes wide like he was seeing her anew. Then, the moment passed and he huffed out a breath.

"Whatever." His wintry countenance returned. "You're strong. But you won't win."

Chapter 2: A Moment of Rest

After procuring enough food from the stalls, Sain and his friends made their way to the meeting place they'd agreed on in the intermediate school building's courtyard. It was one-thirty in the afternoon, and the usual crowd that packed into the courtyard at lunch had already dissipated, leaving the area comfortably vacant. They sat down on a bench to wait for Melia, who appeared soon after.

"I'm back. Sorry to keep you waiting."

"Ah, Maid. Did you finish up whatever your business was?"

"I did," she said with a quick bow of her head. "It went very smoothly."

Sain didn't pry any further. It wasn't that he didn't care; he was plenty curious. But he figured she'd tell him if it was something he needed to know, and he trusted her judgment.

"All right. Now that everyone's here," said Alicia as she began unpacking the food they'd bought, "let's hurry up and chow down so we can head back to the festival. Oh, by the way, Melia, we got something special for you."

She produced a few transparent packages, inside which were strips of smoked seafood. They'd been fairly easy to find, seeing as there were plenty of drinking areas in the festival where alcohol was served, and all of them came with stalls that sold the things. Melia took one look at the thing and froze, save for her twitching cheeks. Alicia lifted an eyebrow.

"What's the matter?"

"A-Are those..."

"Smoked seafood. You love it, right?"

"Um, I..."

"Hm? You don't? Did Sain lie to us?"

"Uh, no, I do like it, but..."

She reluctantly took the packages with a frown before leaning toward Sain and whispering in his ear.

"Excuse me, Master Sain, but could you refrain from telling people about this? It's... apparently, um... a little *exotic* for people to be into these

things, so it gets sort of awkward sometimes...”

“Awkward? Come on, how long have we known each other? What’s there to be embarrassed about? There’s no need to hide it. Be proud of what you love.”

“Sure, whatever, but just keep it between us, okay? Unlike you, I’m not used to humiliating myself in public.”

“What do you mean, ‘unlike me’?! Neither am I, damn it!”

He vehemently protested her suggestion that he was some sort of freak who went around humiliating himself for fun, but she simply gave him a dismissive wave of her hand before opening up one of the packages. She brought one of the smoked strips to her lips and, her initial reluctance melting away in the face of her favorite food, began nibbling on it with the daintiest of bites.

Beside her, Marni was chewing on some fried noodles.

“...These are sort of stiff. I think they got a little too cold.”

“Really?” Alicia leaned over and held out her hand. “Here. Give me those for a second.”

With a puzzled expression, Marni handed the noodles to Alicia, who placed them on her lap.

“Okay... Hmph!”

With a small grunt of exertion, she enveloped the box of noodles with a white fire. Her friends watched with astonishment as she returned Marni’s lunch to her.



“Here you go.”

Marni regarded the noodles for a second before slurping one into her mouth.

“...Mmm. Just right.”

Sain and Melia stared at Alicia in silent wonder. She gave them a smug look.

“What do you think? It’s the Alicia Special. You can’t do that with regular fire magic. It’s only possible with holy fire because I can choose how and what it burns.”

“It’s... Well, it’s pretty amazing, I’ll admit that,” said Sain, “but there’s something about seeing holy fire used as a portable food reheater that’s just... weird. Impressive, but weird.”

He doubted anyone had ever used holy fire like that before. Alicia’s holy fire was by nature a purifying power, meant for cleansing its targets of taint. If she wanted to, she could theoretically produce a fire that warmed people it touched but did not burn them.

“Can I, uh... get mine done too?”

“Sure.”

She gave Sain’s lunch the same treatment. Her genial attitude made him appreciate the profound transformation she’d undergone, and he took a moment to quietly marvel at how she’d changed from the bristling loner she’d been when they first met to the friendly, approachable individual she was now.

After finishing lunch, they made good on their plans to tour the entirety of the festival. The school grounds, which normally felt a little too spacious and vacant for their own good, were now packed so full of vendors that they were almost claustrophobic. They weaved through the roving crowds, taking care not to lose anyone to a particularly dense pack of people rushing by.

“You know, it’s pretty fun to just look around. A lot of these vendors are the kinds you don’t see often,” said Sain.

“Yeah, it’s not every day that a bunch of different businesses all set up booths in one place like this. Plus, the stores are all hoping to gain some returning customers here, so they’re all giving it a hundred and twenty percent in the service department.”

It was food and product samples galore, with many vendors offering big attention-grabbing discounts. Despite having had lunch just now, they couldn't resist reaching for some of the free snacks on offer. As they browsed, Alicia pointed at a stall up ahead.

"Hey, look at the accessories they're selling over there. They look like the kinds you'd be into, Sain."

"You don't say... Let's see... Whoa! You're right! Those look awesome!"

Sain's eyes lit up and he rushed over. It was a black booth that looked like it belonged in a shady alley somewhere. On its counter lay rows of silver accessories, all of which sported gaudy, unnecessarily complicated designs. The whole place exuded an aura of eccentricity that clearly was not working to its favor; there wasn't a single customer, and people gave it weird looks from a distance as they passed by. Sain didn't seem bothered by its presentation at all. If anything, he seemed to enjoy the atmosphere as he perused the items on sale. Some of the accessories were covered with spiky protrusions, while others were shaped like crosses or skulls. What they lacked in subtlety, they made up for in variety. Their appeal, however, was completely lost on Alicia, who settled for second-degree pleasure by watching Sain enjoy himself.

"Good shopkeeper, may I have this one?"

"Certainly... My, I must say, you've got good taste."

"You understand the brilliance on display here?"

"Of course... I see we are kindred spirits."

Sain and the shopkeeper shared a knowing smile and shook hands.

"...Today, I learned the world is a big place, and it's filled with all sorts of people," muttered Alicia.

"...Agreed," said Marni.

They spent the next little while watching the two new soulmates showing off their equally outrageous accessories to one another and trading creepy grins. None of the girls made any attempt to approach them, instead making the wise choice to wait for Sain to finish. Only after he'd gushed to his heart's content did he return, allowing them to move on.

"They sell clothes, too?" said Melia as they approached a booth that looked like a small boutique.

Alicia followed her gaze.

“Looks like they do... Hey, they’ve got some nice clothes there. Let’s go check it out.”

They’d entered some sort of fashion area, and most of the stalls here had clothes on display. Some of them had actual storefronts set up, while others were content to use simple stalls. The former tended to have clothes of higher quality, but the latter were definitely kinder to one’s wallet.

“Hey, Melia, I was thinking... You know how you’re always wearing your maid uniform? Do you ever wear anything else?”

“Well... Sometimes, if the situation calls for it...” replied Melia, her tone hesitant.

“Sometimes, huh?” Alicia said skeptically before turning to Sain. “So, what’s the verdict? Does she?”

“Uh, well... I don’t think the situation has ever called for it, so... I guess not,” he answered with a grimace.

Alicia sighed.

“Look, Melia might be your attendant, but she’s still a girl, all right? Girls have *needs*, and clothing is one of them. Don’t you think you should let her have some downtime every once in a while so she can do her own thing?”

“I do let her! I let her have plenty of downtime! In fact, I keep telling her she can take time off whenever she wants! But she refuses to! And she never gets sick! I tried forcing her to take a day off once... and she just ended up hanging around me all day anyway and kept working like normal.”

Alicia opened her mouth to argue but closed it again when she realized she could easily imagine the scenario playing out. An awkward silence ensued, broken only when Melia stepped in to defend herself.

“Okay, let me set the record straight here. It’s not that I don’t want days off... but they have to at least be relaxing, right? Can *you* relax knowing you left someone like Master Sain to fend for himself?”

“Ahh... Good point.”

“Right? I could go off and do my own thing, but it’d just stress me out in the end.”

“I feel your pain.”

Sain didn’t exactly understand what they were talking about, but he picked up on the tone and scowled at them.

“Hey, you know what...” Alicia said as she gave Melia an enthusiastic grin. “Since we’re here, why don’t we have you try on some other clothes?”

Melia was taken aback by the suggestion.

“But... both you and Miss Marni are wearing your uniforms. It’d be weird if I’m the only one who changed into something else... I’d stand out.”

“You already stand out enough in your maid uniform. Besides, nothing you wear will ever stand out as much as him,” Alicia said, gesturing at Sain with her chin. “He’s practically in cosplay all day.”

Sain was about to point out that his black coat wasn’t cosplay but rather an important and carefully crafted piece of equipment to suppress his power of the holy knight, only to swallow his words when he realized his argument was flawed. The coat’s function was legitimate, but its needlessly dark and restricting design was not part of that function; it was tailor-made, and he’d requested those aesthetics himself.

“But... as Master Sain’s attendant, it’s better for me to keep wearing this —”

“Let’s ask him then.” Alicia turned to Sain. “Does Melia have your permission to wear something else?”

He didn’t hesitate to answer.

“Of course. I also wish for Maid to express herself as she desires.”

With permission granted by her master, Melia lost the one excuse she could fall back on. She looked down at her feet in a rare display of uncertainty. Eventually, she asked hesitantly, “Do you want to see, um... what I look like in other clothes, Master Sain?”

She fidgeted, not meeting his gaze. Her behavior puzzled him, but he nodded nonetheless.

“Yeah, I think I’d appreciate seeing you in something else from time to time.”

“...All right. I’ll go change then.”

She turned and headed into the small boutique.

“What about you, Marni?” asked Alicia. “I haven’t seen you in casual clothing much, either.”

“...I’ll pass. I have to keep my head covered, anyway.”

“True. Maybe next time then.”

As a dark elf, Marni needed to be extra cautious about her appearance. She wasn’t comfortable with drawing attention to herself, so it was better for her to wear something low key during the battle expo.

“Okay, let’s go pick out some clothes for Melia!”

Brimming with enthusiasm, Alicia pulled Marni along into the boutique as well.

“Come on, Sain! You’re part of this too!”

“U-Uh, sure.”

He hesitated for a second when he realized it was a women’s boutique, but an impatient gesture from Alicia convinced him to steel himself and step in. As soon as they walked in, she set upon the clothing racks savagely, snatching everything she felt would suit Melia. Marni wasn’t as openly enthusiastic, but her softening countenance and long gazes at the display mannequins suggested she wasn’t entirely disinterested, either. It occurred to Sain that this was probably going to take a while.

“I think these’ll look great on you. They give off a tidy image. Oh, but then you’d look more or less the same as when you’re in your maid uniform. Maybe we should get a bit more aggressive...” said Alicia as she deliberated their options.

“Um... I’d prefer clothing that doesn’t show as much skin...”

“It’s okay, just try them on first. We can figure out the details later.”

She dismissed Melia’s concern with a wave of her hand and continued to pull more clothes off the racks. Sain nodded to himself, appreciating the way Alicia sifted through the dazzling array of garments like a seasoned professional. She was, he realized, arguably the most in tune with the prevailing trends of girls their age. Melia had been serving him as a maid since childhood and had very little time to indulge in what were commonly accepted as feminine pastimes. Marni was borderline antisocial, leaving her fairly obtuse with regard to fashion and fads. Out of the three girls, Alicia was the only one qualified for the job, and she did it with gusto, hurriedly ushering Melia to the changing room and handing her a couple of sets of clothing. Melia stepped in, and for the span of a minute, the rustling of clothes could be heard from behind the curtain. She then reappeared.

“Um... So, I changed, and...”

The Melia who stepped back out from behind the curtain was clothed in a soft blue shirt, the color of a summer lake, complemented by a white frilly skirt that reached almost down to her knees. Unlike her maid uniform, both pieces were made of a thin, pliant material that accentuated her form. The soft fabric danced to her every movement, giving off an air of fleeting beauty. She’d also removed her hairband, and the simpler design of the

clothes offered little for the attention of onlookers. As a result, their eyes naturally gravitated to the wearer herself, further highlighting her natural beauty.

“Omigosh! You look so good in that!”

“Yeah... It softened your image.”

Melia struggled to respond, alternately puckering her lips and pressing them together but failing to produce any words. She seemed flustered but not entirely averse to the attention.

“Come on, Sain, don’t you have any comments to offer?”

Alicia slapped him on the back and he lurched forward a few steps, putting him face to face with Melia. Her eyes darted around, trying to avoid contact with his. She’d been fidgeting, but his sudden approach caused her to freeze. The confident nonchalance that had come to define her was nowhere to be found, replaced by a stiffness to her expression that bespoke an underlying nervousness as she awaited his verdict. He crossed his arms and carefully examined her from head to toe, as though evaluating every aspect of her appearance. Then, he nodded with satisfaction.

“Mmm. I like it. You look good.”

Alicia and Marni traded frowns.

“Does that... count as a positive reaction? I mean, it’s technically a compliment, but it sort of sounds like he’s just being polite.”

“...It’s him, so he probably means it. He’d probably say the same thing no matter what she wore. And he’d probably always mean it.”

They whispered their thoughts to one another before handing Melia another set of clothes.

“Here, Melia. Try some other ones on too.”

“...Do I have to? I’m fine with these.”

“Come on, just humor me, okay?”

Alicia pushed Melia into the changeroom again, and she reappeared a minute later in a new outfit. A white t-shirt peeked through the front of a long, elegant jacket made from a reddish brown fabric. It fell over a miniskirt, which further gave way to black tights. Compared to her first getup, this one had a calmer air and made her look more mature. Sensing she might have struck gold, Alicia whipped her head toward Sain and stared at him.

“Well?! What do you think?”

He crossed his arms and nodded with satisfaction.

“Mmm. I like it. It looks good.”

She frowned, apparently unimpressed with his response, and pushed Melia back into the changeroom with yet another set of clothing. Another minute passed, and the maid-turned-dress-up-doll stepped back out wearing a white striped top over a green gathered skirt. With every pulling back of the curtain, she and her outfit grew more classy. Her new skirt was clearly unfamiliar to her, and she played with it a little, holding up the hem and shaking it.

“Well?! How’s this?!” asked Alicia, her tone growing increasingly desperate.

Again, Sain nodded with satisfaction.

“Mmm. I like it. It looks good.”

She stifled a frustrated scream and repeated the same process. Yet another minute later, Melia appeared sporting a white long-sleeved shirt that fanned out at the wrist and a short, aquamarine apron dress. In contrast to her usual tidy image, this had the relaxed look of a girl out for some fun on her day off, which was *further* contrasted with the rosy blush of embarrassment on her cheeks. The way she kept looking away from him, coupled with the appeal of the outfit itself, finally struck a chord that was buried deep within his heart, and he fumbled his delivery of the cross-arms-nod-head routine.

“And?! How’s this?!”

“U-Uh well, it, um... It looks very good on her,” he stammered nervously.

“All right, looks like we got ourselves a winner,” declared Alicia.

“...His reactions are way too easy to read,” muttered Marni.

At Alicia’s behest, Melia purchased this set of attire and wore it out of the boutique. As they left, Marni gave Sain a flat, admonishing look. He held his hands up, miming bewilderment. She rolled her eyes and ran a few steps to join the other two girls, leaving him feeling rather misunderstood. He wasn’t, in fact, just being polite with those compliments; he honestly thought Melia looked good in everything she tried on. She just happened to look even better in one particular outfit, which caught him off guard.

“I’m really not used to wearing this...” said Melia.

Her maid uniform had been folded up and placed in a bag. Currently, she was wandering through the lanes of festival stalls in her newly purchased clothes. The shorter length of the dress revealed more of her legs,

leaving her feeling rather antsy, and she couldn't help but glance at her exposed knees as she walked.

"Um... Are you really sure I look good in this?" she asked Sain in an apprehensive tone.

"Absolutely," he replied with a firm nod. "Why don't you start dressing like this more often from now on? Between after school and holidays, there should be plenty of chances for you to have some fun with fashion."

"...If you say so. I'll think about it."

She turned her face down and looked away, but it didn't hide the smile on her lips.

"Granted, this also seems like the kind of outfit that's going to attract unwanted attention. I hope no one tries to hit on you," he said as he looked around.

Many people near them stole furtive glances at her, blushing as they walked by. Melia had always looked mature for her age, and it was entirely possible that her onlookers didn't realize she was still a student in the intermediate division.

"Don't worry." Alicia chimed in. "Not many people from the capital city are crazy enough to hit on Jenifa students."

"...I guess you have a point."

Jenifa Royal Magic Academy was famous for valuing competence above all else. Its students were known to be highly skilled, and unwelcome advances on them could have painful consequences.

"...Mostly due to Alicia," Marni said in a low voice.

"Hm? Miss Grim, what do you mean by that?"

"...A while back, Alicia got hit on in Raskas, and she gave the guy one hell of a slap. It turned into a whole incident and made some headlines. Ever since then, people stopped hitting on Jenifa students."

"Hey, Marni! You promised not to tell anyone about that..." said Alicia with an embarrassed look on her face.

"I-I see. So that's what happened."

"Yeah... It took the guy a full two weeks to recover, apparently."

"Seriously?"

Sain could just imagine the scene of the guy trying to make a move on her, only to be sent flying. He almost pitied the poor fool.

"With that said, Miss Gold, you should perhaps rethink your tendency to resort to violence..."

He rubbed at the bump on his head, which he'd earned for teaching an impressionable young child about the allure of darkness.

"Hmph, it's their fault for deserving it. Do you have any idea how annoying that guy was? He came on way too strong and he just wouldn't go away, so I just smacked him a little."

Marni gave her a flat look.

"Smacked him a little?"

Alicia grimaced and looked away.

"I have to say, though, I never knew that Miss Gold had, um... gotten hit on before," said Sain.

That caused Alicia to perk up again.

"Well, now you know. In case you weren't aware, I'm actually pretty popular around here." She showed him a toothy grin. "What? Are you jealous?"

"I wouldn't say I'm jealous, but I do sympathize with them. You are, after all, a very attractive person."

"...I-I'll never understand how you can say stuff like that with a straight face."

Her cockiness proved short-lived, and she turned away with her hands on her cheeks, a red blush spanning ear to ear. It would have been endearing if a rather creepy giggle didn't escape her a second later. Apparently, she'd found his comment equal parts embarrassing and gratifying.

A very attractive person... when you haven't opened your mouth.

The words surfaced in Sain's mind, but in a rare display of prudence, he decided to keep them to himself. They'd known each other since the first day of school, and he was starting to understand her better. He now knew what kind of things set her off, and *that* was definitely one of them.

"Um, excuse me! Are you Sain?! One of the contestants in the battle expo?!"

An unfamiliar voice suddenly called his name. He turned to discover a girl wearing the intermediate division's uniform. Her blue hair was tied back in a ponytail, and she was gazing at him with eager interest.

"Yes, I am..."

The girl introduced herself in a bright voice.

"My name is Sasha! I'm an intermediate first year with the student newspaper!"

Jenifa was home to a variety of student clubs, and Sain had learned of the newspaper club's existence when he was walking down the school's hallway one day and a copy of the paper they'd made happened to be posted on the bulletin board on the wall.

"The paper is currently interviewing contestants who made it to the third round of the tournament. Could I have a few moments of your time?" asked Sasha.

Sain and the three girls traded glances.

"If it's just a few questions, I'd say go ahead," said Alicia.

Marni and Melia agreed, so he turned to Sasha and nodded.

"All right. We don't mind."

"Thank you very much! Let's start—" She lowered her head in gratitude but paused when she looked back up, her eyes settling on the girl beside him. "Wait a minute. Is that... Melia?"

"It certainly is," she answered.

"Wow! I didn't recognize you at first! Hmm, I have to say, the usual outfit is plenty attractive, but this new look you're sporting is no slouch either. Then again, I guess I should expect nothing less from one of the intermediate division's four madonnas!"

Melia lifted one eyebrow as high as it would go.

"...Four madonnas? What?"

"So, the boys decided to go ahead and rate all the girls in your division and came up with a ranking chart. They call the girls in the top four spots the four madonnas. Two of them are first years, by the way, and one of them happens to be you. The other is Yuria. You know, one of the Eldis twins."

Sain hadn't ever heard of this ranking chart, and judging by how his companions' reactions were all variations on "Huh. Okay then," they hadn't either. It didn't surprise him that Melia and Yuria occupied the top spots, though. Both of them had undeniably pretty features.

"Just for your information, Alicia was also in contention for the top four spots, but lost out when a bunch of boys said she's more monster than madonna."

"I'm *what?!* "

"Augh! Ow! Ow! This is it! This is exactly what they mean!" Sasha exclaimed, her limbs flailing as Alicia grabbed her face and squeezed.

Sain hurriedly stepped in to stop Alicia from succumbing to her inner barbarian.

“Geez,” complained Sasha after she was released. “You almost broke my face...”

“*You* broke a maiden’s heart!”

“Eh? A maiden? Where?”

It occurred then to Sain that this Sasha girl was not a particularly discreet individual.

“Okay, that’s it.”

Alicia went in for the kill, and it took a great deal of convincing from the other three to stop her. She was still fuming, though, and her anger found a new target: Sain.

“Wait a minute, if it’s the boys in our division who said that, then...” she growled. “Saaaaaaain?”

“Eep!” He squealed. “H-Hold on! I have no idea what she was talking about! This is the first time I’ve heard of it!”

“Enough excuses. Get your traitorous butt over here.”

She took a menacing step toward him. Sensing impending danger to his person, he started backing away from her.

“Actually, when this conversation happened, Sain was being ostracized as usual, so I think you can trust him on that,” said Sasha.

“R-Really? Ostracized as usual, huh... I guess that does make him trustworthy.”

“...Being trusted has never felt so bad,” mumbled Sain.

Sasha’s testimony proved his innocence, but it came at the cost of his dignity.

“As for how the ‘monster’ image came about for Alicia,” Sasha continued, “I did hear a lot of people say it was because they kept seeing her smack Sain around.”

“See?! It’s your fault after all!” exclaimed Alicia.

“That is *literally* the opposite of what she said!”

Sain flailed his arms indignantly at her egregious attempt to shift the blame. Granted, there were plenty of times when it *was* his fault, but this was definitely not one of them.

“Anyway, now that we’re all nice and familiar with each other, can I start interviewing the two of you, already? Let’s start with some simple self-introductions!” said Sasha, who pulled them back on topic.

Sain was still bristling from the profound injustice he’d suffered, but he made an effort to put it behind him for a moment and straightened himself.

“I’m Sain Fostess, an intermediate first year, and I’m aiming to become the dark knight.”

“I’m Melia, also an intermediate first year, and I’m the attendant of the Darkness Dork here.”

“Stop calling me Darkness Dork, damn it,” he complained while keeping a straight face.

“Thank you for introducing yourselves. Next, I’d like to ask a few questions. The first is for Darkness Dork— Excuse me, I mean, Sain.”

“Okay, hold on. That was definitely intentional.”

“As a contestant entering the third round of the tournament, there will surely be growing curiosity about what kind of person you are.”

“Hey, you can’t just ignore—”

“To that end, could you tell us a little about how you usually spend your days here at the academy?”

“...You’re a cheeky one, aren’t you?”

He could hear Alicia and Marni snickering behind him, and he had to clench his fists and take a deep breath to suppress another wave of irritation.

“Fine, whatever,” he said, yielding. “Anyway, like I was saying, my goal is to become the dark knight, so I spend most of my free time learning dark magic.”

“Hmm, learning dark magic, you say?”

“That’s right. During downtime between classes, I read textbooks about dark magic. After school, I go either to the library tower to look for other books or the training gyms to practice actual fighting. My days off are more or less the same. Oh, I should also mention that Miss Grim here is my mentor.”

He gestured at Marni, who cautiously pulled her hood a little further down over her head as Sasha looked in her direction.

“The dark elf Marni, otherwise known as the master of the library tower, I presume? I see... So you’re studying under her. There’s a lot of talk right now among students about how you’ve suddenly gotten stronger. Is her mentorship the reason for that?”

“It absolutely is. Miss Grim helped me a great deal during the field exercises as well. Without her... I’d never have managed to come this far,” he said in an earnest tone, which caused Marni to look away in embarrassment.

“I see, I see...” mumbled Sasha as she furiously scribbled notes. Then, she looked at her second interviewee. “What about you, Melia? How do you spend your days here at the academy?”

“I’m Master Sain’s attendant, so... I’m mostly in the same places. Usually, I’m helping him do whatever he needs done, but I spend most of my time around him even when I’m doing my own thing.”

“Are the two of you together on your days off as well?”

“Yes. I’m his attendant, after all,” she answered with a tone of professionalism.

“I see that the rumors are true. The two of you are indeed very close to each other.”

“Are we?” asked Sain and Melia in unison. They eyed each other quizzically.

“Oh, I see what’s going on. A clueless pair,” Sasha muttered to herself with a sigh before addressing them again. “Many students attending Jenifa are nobility, so attendants aren’t exactly unheard of. Those who spend every waking moment with their master, though, are definitely a rare breed. Normally, they trade shifts with other attendants after school or during days off.”

“They do?” asked Sain.

“Yes. Your current arrangement is rather extraordinary.” Sasha lowered her voice to a whisper, but it didn’t hide the bubbling curiosity in her tone. “Excuse me, but would you say the relationship between the two of you goes beyond that of a student and his attendant?”

Sain sighed and was just about to deny the claim when Melia answered first.

“It’s complicated. In a way... it’s both yes and no.”

“B-Both yes and no...?”

Sasha’s eyes went wide. Sain, taken aback by Melia’s answer, hastily whispered in her ear.

“Hey, Maid, what was that supposed to mean?”

“I’m also the attendant of the holy knight, after all,” she whispered back before letting out a knowing giggle.

Technically, what she said wasn’t wrong, but it seemed like the kind of remark that was going to cause misunderstandings down the road — not that he could do anything about it, since he had no way of explaining its nuances.

“D-Details! Can you give me more details?!” exclaimed Sasha. Her gaze was intense, almost hungry.

“Unfortunately, I can offer no further details. All I can say is that we’re sort of special. Our relationship is a little more than just a student and his attendant,” replied Melia, purposefully opting for a vague and suggestive answer.

“This... is a heck of a scoop!”

Sasha gulped as she scribbled even more furiously in her notepad. The interview continued for some time, as Sain and Melia answered questions about topics that ranged from their hobbies and talents to what they were doing before they came to the academy. They kept their responses fairly innocuous. For obvious reasons, neither mentioned a word about their holy knight activities. For questions that couldn’t be answered honestly, they played off each other’s lies to craft a cohesive fiction.

“All right. Last set of questions,” said Sasha as her pen came to a stop. “What are your thoughts on your next opponents? Do you feel confident that you’ll win? If so, is there any reasoning you’d like to share?” she asked, gesturing at Sain to go first.

Sain pressed his thumb to his chin and contemplated his answer. His opponent for the third match was the younger of the Eldis twins, Yuria. After collecting his thoughts, he gave a frank reply.

“I think it’s going to be a tough match for me. Yuria is a formidable opponent, and slugging it out toe-to-toe with her is unlikely to work out in my favor. Furthermore, she’s also the clever type, so I doubt I’ll have much luck trying to outwit her.”

“You seem very familiar with Yuria’s characteristics. Do you know her well?”

“Yes. We battled each other during the field exercises. At the time, I was fortunate enough to have the help of my friends here and thereby claimed victory. This time... it will be one on one. I’ll need to have a plan going in.”

“A plan, you say?”

“I feel like she’s not used to close-quarters combat. If I can get in her face, I might have a chance.”

“I see...”

Sasha dutifully wrote his answer into her notepad.

“What about you, Melia? Your opponent is the student council president, so...”

“Well, at this point, I don’t think I need to say much about him,” she answered. “As pretty much everyone knows, he’s one of those master-of-all-trades-and-jack-of-none types. Trying to outsmart an opponent like that with some sort of cheap trick tends to backfire, so I intend to face him head-on.”

“In other words, it’s going to be a clash of raw skill and power. How confident are you that you’ll win?”

Melia paused for a second before replying.

“No comment.”

Sasha nodded with understanding at her deflection. Then, after flipping through her notepad to confirm she didn’t forget to ask any questions, she stood up.

“Thank you very much for your time today! The contents of this interview will probably be talked about by the commentators before tomorrow’s match, so look forward to that!”

She bid them an energetic goodbye and ran off.

“So, the battle expo is only getting started,” mused Sain as he watched Sasha and her blue ponytail disappear into the crowd. “It looks like tomorrow is when things really start heating up.”

There was undoubtedly a lot of fierce competition in store, and the news club was out in force interviewing contestants to capitalize on the audience’s enthusiasm.

“I’m a little thirsty from talking so much,” said Melia.

“Yeah, let’s find some place to relax for a bit,” concurred Sain.

He looked around for a spot where they could get some rest.

“...Everywhere’s full of people,” muttered Marni.

It was three in the afternoon — exactly when fatigue was starting to kick in for the visitors and everyone felt like taking a break. Stores with seated tables were packed full, outdoor benches were already claimed, and even the stairs in front of buildings were occupied. Just as they were starting to dread the prospect of having nowhere to go, they heard a bright female voice nearby.

“Thank you very much, Master, and we hope you come again!”

It belonged to a girl who was bidding goodbye to a group of four men who had just stepped out of a cafe with a pink sign.

“Huh. Isn’t that the maid cafe Sain got all fascinated with in the morning?” asked Alicia.

“...It looks like four seats just opened up,” added Marni.

A waitress dressed in a monochrome maid uniform stood at the entrance. It was indeed the store on the flyer Sain had gotten before his first match, and the four men leaving meant there were exactly enough open seats for them. However, with Sain having bungled his interaction with the maid earlier in the day and hurt Melia’s feelings, walking in there now seemed like a great way to make things very awkward. Three pairs of eyes inadvertently shifted toward Melia.

“...It’s fine. Don’t mind me,” she said. “In fact, I’m also sort of curious about how the maids in places like these work, so... feel free to go in.”

“R-Really? Okay, well, let’s go, then?” suggested Alicia.

Seeing that Melia wasn’t bothered by the incident in the morning anymore, they relaxed and headed toward the maid cafe.

“I mean, Sain *did* say that Melia’s the one and only maid for him. After a statement like that, there’s no way he’d be interested in some random maids in a cafe, right? Melia’s leaps and bounds beyond them,” Alicia added.

Sain nodded.

“Right. What happened this morning was a misunderstanding. I was caught off guard. That’s all. They might be wearing maid uniforms, but they’re mere amateurs on the inside. They’ve got nothing on a professional like yourself,” he said in an attempt to sweet-talk her into letting his earlier blunder slide.

“...Really? Do you *really* mean that?”

“I do! I swear I do! As a matter of fact, I didn’t even remember that cafe existed until we saw it just now!” he exclaimed passionately. “I mean, I’ve got a real maid who’s been with me for years! What use do I have with a place like that? I have no interest in seeing what’s inside. We’re only going in because it just happened to be the one place that’s not full. Otherwise, I’d be fine going anywhere else.”

“...Okay already. If you really meant what you said, then it’s fine.” Melia looked away. “It’s still nice of you to make it clear though, so... thanks.”

A hint of a smile appeared on her face. Seeing that Hurricane Melia had dissipated, Sain quietly breathed out in relief.

“Nice one, Sain. Looks like you’re starting to figure out the female psyche.”

“A-Am I? I’m not really sure, to be honest, but if you say so, then I guess I am.”

Alicia and Marni criticized him on an almost daily basis about how he didn’t understand how girls think. He wasn’t aware that he’d improved in any way but, apparently, he was getting better at it. Figuring it must be some sort of subconscious thing, he set the matter aside in his mind and followed the girls into the cafe. As they stepped through the entrance, they were greeted by two maids, one on each side.

“Welcome home, Master!”

An alien world stretched out before them. Almost everything, from the wallpaper to the couches, was some shade of pink. At each table, waitresses in maid uniforms served the customers in much closer proximity than Sain was used to seeing in such establishments, and they conversed with a sense of intimacy.

“Wh-Whoa...”

The novel sight drew from him a breath of awe.

“This way to your seats please. By the way, Master, if you happen to have one of the flyers our maids were handing out this morning, you can receive a discount on your drinks,” said the waitress as she showed them to their table.

“Huh. Flyers. I do remember seeing one of those,” Alicia said, scratching her head.

“...But didn’t we throw it away already?” asked Marni.

“You mean this?” said Sain, casually reaching into his coat pocket and pulling out a flyer.

“Wow! You have one! Thank you so much for holding on to our flyer, Master!”

“Yeah, I figured it might come in handy like this, so I was keeping it safe— Eep!”

Feeling a sudden sense of mortal danger behind him, Sain spun around.

“You were *what*? ”

He found Melia glaring at him, her eyes wide with outrage.

“Uh, wait, I mean—”

“Keeping it safe, huh? Were you now, Master Sain? I guess you must have really wanted to come to this cafe. I see, I see. So that’s how it is.”

“Wait, listen to me, Maid! This is a complete coincidence. The thing looked sort of fancy, so I just held on to it. That’s it. I know what this looks like, but it’s definitely not what I was trying to do! This is not about me secretly wanting to check out the waitresses here! I swear!”

His desperate pleading fell on deaf ears.

“Seeing as you like this place so much, here’s a little riddle for you,” she said with venom in her voice. “What starts with ‘m’ and ends with ‘aid’? And is something you’re going to need very very soon?”

“E-Erm...” he stammered. “I-It’s not ‘maid’, is it?”

“*Medical aid* .”

“Eeep!”

Sain recoiled in terror. He’d done it. The flyer had been the last straw. He’d made Melia snap. Granted, he was technically telling the truth. It was an eye-catching flyer and he’d never seen anything like it before, so he’d reflexively stuffed it in his pocket. Of course, even he had to admit some part of him definitely wanted to go take a look. After all, “having zero interest in a cafe” and “carefully stowing away its flyer in his coat pocket and carrying it around all day” were fundamentally at odds with one another.

Alicia leaned over and whispered in his ear as they were led to their seats.

“By the way, I take back what I said about you and the female psyche. You didn’t learn a thing.”

“Okay, okay, I get it,” he muttered.

“Also, you really need to start figuring this out. Before you end up in a coffin.”

“A coffin?!”

He paled at the word, its ring far more ominous than any of his theatrics could ever muster.

After sitting down, Sain and his companions looked through the menu and ordered some drinks. A few minutes later, a maid came back with them.

“Your order is here, Master. Here are your lattes, and here’s your apple tea,” she said, setting the former down in front of Marni and Melia, and the latter in front of Alicia. “Please enjoy.”

She gave them a friendly smile before leaving.

“Huuuuh...”

Sain’s gaze lingered on the girl as she walked away.

“Stop ogling.”

“S-Sorry.”

Melia’s curt command caused him to hastily look back down at the table. To be fair, he wasn’t actually mesmerized by the girl; he was taking in the air of the cafe itself and enjoying its exotic allure. This was unfortunately not apparent to an observer, who did not have access to the inner workings of his mind, resulting in rather unfavorable interpretations of his behavior. Melia, for example, had been quietly fuming ever since they’d sat down.

“Mmm, this is really good,” remarked Alicia as she took a sip of her apple tea.

“...The service is surprisingly mediocre. I expected more,” said Marni, evidently less impressed by the establishment.

“Yeah, but considering there are kids from the junior division running around, they probably had to tone things down a little... as evidenced by that poster over there.”

Alicia pointed at an advertisement posted on the wall, which urged customers to visit their main store in the capital city for more “extensive” service.

“And here is your cappuccino with latte art,” said the waitress, who’d returned with Sain’s order. “Do you have any particular requests for your latte art, Master?”

Having pondered the issue previously, he crossed his arms and declared without hesitation, “The dark dragon’s emblem please.”

“Th-The dark dragon’s... emblem?”

“Indeed. It’s said that there exists a secret organization in the West Continent which worships dark dragons... and the ominous symbol that defines their beliefs is the dark dragon’s emblem— Ow!”

He yelped when Alicia reached across with her leg and stomped on his foot. She then grabbed his right hand and, ignoring his pained groan, held it up to show the waitress a ring he was wearing.

“Can you draw something like the thing on this ring?”

“Absolutely!”

The waitress grinned confidently and quickly got to work. With milk and a spoon, she soon produced a pattern on the frothy surface of his drink.

“And there we go! Done!”

Floating on the top layer of his cappuccino was an impressively accurate recreation of the pattern on his ring.

“Wh-Whoa...”

“Huh. That’s actually pretty good.”

Sain marveled at it. Even Alicia couldn’t help but express some awe.

“It’s so beautiful that it’d be a waste to drink,” said Sain with a pained expression.

“I appreciate your compliment, Master, but it’d be more of a waste if it got cold before you managed to drink it.”

“True. Let’s have a go at it then.”

He brought the cup to his mouth and took a sip. A stream of sweet, foamy goodness flowed past his lips and bathed his tongue before slowly giving way to the distinctive piquancy of coffee. The two tastes — sweet and bitter — complemented each other well, melding into a unique flavor that was easy on the senses and could be enjoyed by children and adults alike.

“Mmm... Delicious.”

“Thank you very much!” The waitress cheerfully bowed at him before looking back up at him and frowning. “Oh no, Master, you got a little bit on yourself. Here, let me get that for you.”

She produced a handkerchief from her pocket and leaned toward him. The unexpected gesture caught him completely by surprise, and he froze as her face neared his. Then, she touched the cloth to his lips and removed a small remnant of his drink with a quick wipe.

“There we go. All good now,” she said, folding up the napkin with a smile.

“E-Erm... Uh, thanks.”

“Oh, Master, you can be so sloppy sometimes. But that’s what makes you adorable— Eek!”

Unbeknownst to Sain, throughout the entire exchange, Melia had been staring daggers at the girl, who recoiled like startled prey when she noticed. The motion caused her to bump the table with her leg, which spilled some of the cappuccino.

“I-I’m so sorry, Master! I’ll make a new one for you right away!”

She used the same napkin to wipe down the table before running away toward the kitchen like she’d seen a ghost. Sain scratched his head, perplexed by her reaction. Alicia and Marni, neither of whom had caught a

glimpse of Melia's murderous glare, looked at each other with puzzled expressions as well.

"What's gotten into her?"

"...Who knows."

Sain glanced at his cup with a hint of regret.

"I have to say, that was a pretty impressive piece of work."

"Yeah. We don't get to see much latte art around here," agreed Alicia.

Melia was not impressed.

"That's got nothing to do with being a maid."

"Well, I guess that's true," said Sain, taking care to temper his tone to avoid ruffling Melia's feathers further, "but personally, I'm fond of skills like those that can bring joy to someone else. I know it definitely brought me joy. It's got its own kind of charm, you know? A kind of charm that real, professional maids don't have."

He might have tempered his tone, but he failed to select his words carefully. As soon as he said that, Melia shot to her feet.

"...Excuse me for a moment."

She walked away without another word. After she disappeared behind a corner, Alicia shot him a reproachful glare.

"What was that for, Sain? Why would you sing the praises of other maids in front of her?"

"S-Sorry, I was just making an observation. It wasn't meant to make Maid look bad or anything..."

"I swear, one of these days, you're going to wake up with a knife in your chest."

"A knife?!"

He wanted to argue that was going a little too far but, aware that he did hurt Melia's feelings, chose to remain silent and engage in some honest self-reflection. They waited for a good five minutes, but there was still no sign of her.

"...What's taking her so long?" Marni murmured.

Just then, a maid came bearing Sain's replacement order.

"Here you go. One cappuccino with latte art."

She placed the cup down in front of him.

"Ah, thank— Huh? Maid?"

He looked at the girl and froze.

"Yes, I am indeed a maid. Any other questions?"

It wasn't one of the waitresses but Melia who'd brought him his drink. She was wearing her usual maid uniform, having changed into it presumably after she'd excused herself from their table.

"So, Master, I hear you wanted a dark dragon's emblem for your latte art. Here you go then."

Sain and the other two girls watched with bewilderment as she began pouring milk into the cup, gently agitating it with a thin spoon in the process. Within seconds, a distinct pattern appeared on the surface of his cappuccino.



“Th-This is... definitely the dark dragon’s emblem! It’s impeccable!” he exclaimed with astonishment.

“I can’t believe you actually managed this,” said Alicia. “There’s so much detail.”

“...Not to sound mean, but the one from the other girl looks like child’s play in comparison,” added Marni.

The sheer quality of Melia’s latte art elicited comments of earnest admiration from the other two girls.

“I can make stuff like this too, you know,” said Melia as she shot Sain a sullen gaze.

“Uh, right.”

Her gaze darkened into a glower and she leaned over him.

“I can make stuff like this too, you know .”

“Okay! Okay! I get it! I’ll ask you to do it next time! I’m sorry for what I said!”

He raised his hands in submission and begged forgiveness. His prior comment about how professional maids lacked skills with the kind of charm that could bring joy to others had clearly rubbed her the wrong way. Now that Melia had demonstrated the same skill, but with an artistic proficiency that outstripped the other waitress by leaps and bounds, he made a sincere apology and retracted the offending statement. The gesture seemed to satisfy Melia, who nodded with satisfaction at his forehead-on-table pose of apology, and she returned to her seat.

“Mmm... You know what? I think I still feel most comfortable in this outfit,” she said as she gave her maid uniform a pat.

Evidently feeling more at ease in familiar attire, she leaned back and took a sip of her own latte.

“By the way, where did you get that cappuccino from?” asked Alicia.

“I went to the back counter and told them I’m a professional maid and that I’d like to bring the drinks over myself. They were okay with it.”

That was definitely classic Melia; even during a bout of sullen displeasure, she never failed to follow proper protocol and ask permission.

“Huh. That reminds me. Maid, you know what the dark dragon’s emblem looks like?”

“Of course I do.” She took another sip for effect before answering.

“Because I do my homework. No self-respecting maid would allow herself to be ignorant of her master’s tastes and interests.”

That was exactly the kind of thing that no maid cafe waitress could ever manage. It was a feat possible for Melia alone, because she attended to him and him only. She had no other master, and had served him with all her heart for as long as they'd known each other. The maids from the cafe had pleasant smiles and were eager to please, but they had no idea what his hobbies or talents were; they knew nothing about him as a person. That was what set Melia apart from all the other maids here, and it was what made their relationship unique — she was *his* maid. Having realized that vital distinction, he smiled.

“You are indeed the one and only maid for me.”

“...Good, because I'm all you need.”

She brought her cup to her lips again. This time, it was to hide the smile that had crept across them.

Two hours later, after leaving the cafe and finishing their tour of the stalls, they decided to call it a day.

“See you tomorrow.”

“...We'll still be cheering for you.”

At the main school gate, Alicia and Marni waved goodbye and headed off toward their dorm rooms. Jenifa Royal Magic Academy had multiple student dormitories, and the two of them lived in a separate building.

“Shall we head back too?” asked Melia.

“Yeah. It's still early, but it'll be good to get some rest so I can be in tip-top shape for tomorrow,” answered Sain.

They started walking toward their dorm as well. The boisterous atmosphere of the festival had calmed under the orange hues of the evening sun, and the crowds had thinned considerably. There were two more days of the magic battle expo, after all, and many visitors probably figured it would be unwise to run themselves ragged on the first day.

“Maid, tell me something... What *are* your chances, actually? Do you think you can win against Cain?”

“I'm not quite sure. He's the kind of person who has taken down Chaos single-handedly, after all. That puts him on a completely different level.”

“Yeah, he has, hasn't he? During the field exercises...”

Chaos were far stronger than normal monsters, and yet the student council president had been able to defeat them, not only by himself but apparently with ease. It seemed likely that none of his regular classmates

would even stand a chance against him. Melia, however, was not regular; she was also exceptionally powerful compared to her peers. What would happen when the two butted heads? Sain, for one, was eager to find out.

“Hm? Hey, isn’t that...”

Looking ahead, he discovered the sight of a girl he recognized.

“...The vice-president?”

The student council vice-president, Emilia, stood at the side of the road, her expression troubled. Her purple hair fluttered occasionally in the breeze, but she was otherwise motionless. Recalling that she’d stepped in to deescalate the situation when Roxas had been harassing him during tournament registration, he approached her. If she was dealing with some sort of problem, then this would be a good chance to repay the debt.

“Hey, Emilia. What’re you doing standing around in a place like this?”

His voice seemed to snap her out of her thoughts, and she turned around with surprise.

“Who’s th— Oh, it’s Sain and Melia. I... wasn’t doing anything, really.”

“I see. So... the ‘staring out into the distance with a troubled expression on your face’ thing is just something you do for fun?”

“...I was doing some thinking,” she replied with intentional terseness. “I see you both made it through the first day of the tournament.”

“Hah. Of course we did,” he said proudly. “On that note, are you here by yourself? Where’s Cain?”

He looked around, but the president was nowhere to be found.

“He’s...” Concern clouded Emilia’s expression. She opened her mouth to speak, paused, and reconsidered. “I’m sorry, but do you have some time? I need to talk to you about something.”

Her tone suggested whatever she needed to talk about, it was not to be taken lightly.

Having met each other only a handful of times, Sain was, at best, only mildly acquainted with Emilia. Nevertheless, there was something almost desperate about the way she asked to speak with him, and he figured it would be wise to listen. A glance at Melia revealed that she agreed.

“I won’t take too long.”

She evidently meant what she said, as rather than a cafe where they could sit down, she instead led them into a nearby alleyway, where she proceeded to get right to the point.

“I just want to know what he’s up to. That’s all.”

Sain frowned, failing to understand what she was looking for.

“...What do you mean?”

“I mean... Um...”

Her hesitation suggested that whatever was troubling her, it was complicated. Seeing that she was struggling to find the right words, Melia stepped in to help.

“You’re talking about your president, right? Let’s take this one step at a time. Why don’t you first tell us what kind of person he is to you?”

It was an invitation for her to collect her thoughts by beginning with something that should come naturally to her. The question had its intended effect. Though she still stuttered at times, her eyes went distant and she started speaking.

“The president, he’s... a very genuine person. Honest through and through, and in that sense, very likeable.” As Emilia continued, the words came more easily to her. “He’s not fond of compromises, and he’s always very strict on himself... He tries to do everything perfectly, both in his academics and his work in the student council... Whenever the council members rely on him for something, he never lets us down... He’s like... a ray of light. Strong and steady and sincere.”

Her cheeks filled with color as she spoke. Sain noticed the change and smiled.

“You really care about him, don’t you?”

“...Yes.” She nodded slowly. “But there’s... probably also another side to him... A side he doesn’t show us.”

She paused and bit her lip, the silence inadvertently creating a moment of dramatic anticipation. With a pained expression, she continued.

“Last month, there was a day when I went to the student council office early in the morning... and I found him inside, and he was... he was a mess. Bruises, gashes, everything... So many wounds. He was hurt everywhere.”

“Hurt... everywhere?” echoed an astonished Sain.

She nodded.

“You’re students here, so you understand my shock, right? This is *him* we’re talking about — the person who has defeated everyone he ever fought without breaking a sweat — and he was hurt all over. There was so much blood... He looked like he was about to die right there and then.” She closed her eyes and shuddered. Then, keeping her gaze downcast, she

clenched her jaw and continued. "I asked him what happened, but he wouldn't tell me. He's stubbornly honest, so he'd never lie. Instead, he just refused to say anything. I tried talking to him. Many times. I told him I was worried about him, but every time, he just pushed me away without batting an eye. Every time... he just tells me it's none of my business..."

Then, she looked up and stared straight at Sain.

"That was when I noticed he became unusually interested in you." Her amber eyes were sharp and interrogating. "Sain Fostess, you know something, don't you? What is he doing behind our backs? What in the world is he hiding from us?"

Sain held her gaze, his expression unchanged and his lips still. In the ensuing silence, he thought about what Emilia said and quickly put two and two together. The side of Cain Theresia that he refused to show others... almost certainly had something to do with fighting Chaos. After considerable contemplation, he chose to lie.

"...Sorry, but I don't know anything."

He didn't know what Cain's intentions were, but anything involving Chaos was sensitive information. Careless dissemination of such knowledge would only drag unwitting bystanders into the conflict and create more victims.

"I see."

Emilia looked crestfallen from his answer.

"...You're really worried about him, huh?"

"Of course I am," she said in a firm tone. "I'm his assistant. I spend a lot of time helping him with his duties, so you can be sure I'll notice when he's behaving strangely. Sometimes, he just runs off somewhere with a weapon in his hand. Even when he's in the school, there are moments when he'd just stop and look out the window into the distance. I've seen his eyes when he does that, and they were... so terribly cold. I know I'm probably not making much sense to you, and I won't blame you for thinking I'm going crazy... but I know what I saw. And I get the feeling that when he disappears, he's out there fighting something. Maybe he's doing it for some greater good... but to me, it just looks like he's indulging his own self-destructive tendencies."

"...Maybe he has his reasons for doing so."

That brought a sad smile to her lips.

“Reasons? What kind of reasons would push him to fight until he’s mere inches from dying and still refuse to ask others for help? And if there are such reasons... are they worth it?”

Again, there was silence, but this time, it was tinged with sorrow.

“...Thank you for your time,” she said eventually.

“I’m... sorry I couldn’t be of more help.”

He apologized with a polite bow of his head before asking her a question in return.

“Tell me one thing. That time when you found him covered in blood... Do you remember what day it was?”

She thought about it for a moment.

“It was... the beginning of last month. The day after the field exercises were canceled.”

They parted ways afterward. Sain and Melia watched as Emilia left the alley and walked off toward the school.

“Judging from the timing, it’s a pretty safe bet to say that his injuries were from fighting off the Chaos that showed up on the last day of the field exercises,” said Melia.

“Yeah...”

On the final day of the field exercises, Cain had wiped out multiple creatures of Chaos in the blink of an eye, and he’d done it with them watching. He’d made it look effortless, but the reality was probably different. The fight had cost him numerous injuries. It was, in fact, rather obvious, now that he stopped to think about it. Taking on hordes of Chaos and coming out unscathed was a feat reserved for the holy knight. No normal human was capable of performing such a feat.

“Rushing toward his own death, huh...”

It was true that dealing with Chaos required extreme discretion, and Cain’s silence on the matter was understandable. However, they were not an opponent he could fight on his own. In his mind, Sain could picture the sight of a single warrior in a lonely crusade against Chaos. He’d seen this before. As his vision began to blend with his memories, the figure of Cain blurred and took on the shape of a young girl.

“Is something wrong?”

He regarded the girl beside him, who looked up at him with eyes full of color and life, and shook his head.

“...No, nothing’s wrong.”

A stifling swirl of emotions filled his chest. He swallowed and resumed their journey back to the dorm.

Chapter 3: Of Fates and Holy Knights

The magic battle expo entered its second day, which would see the remaining second round matches and the third round matches unfold. Sain, who'd already won his second match, was free to spend his morning doing some leisurely spectating as the second round wrapped up. He then ate a modest lunch, so as to avoid negatively impacting his performance later in the day. At one in the afternoon, the third round of matches commenced.

"It's almost time," announced Melia.

Alicia and Marni each offered some words of encouragement.

"Go show them what you're made of, Sain."

"...We're rooting for you."

"Right. Off I go then."

He turned away from the three girls and made his way toward the lecture hall that served as a waiting room. With the conclusion of the second round, only the third round, semifinals, and grand finals remained. The dwindling pool of remaining contestants left the waiting room noticeably emptier than before, and Sain felt himself tense as he stepped in.

"Sir Sain."

Hearing a voice behind him, he turned to find himself face to face with his next opponent, Yuria Eldis.

"I look forward to our match."

She offered her hand. He took it with a grin.

"As do I."

They shook hands in a display of mutual respect. It was an unspoken agreement to honor the spirit of competition and to each give it their all.

...Or so he thought, because for some reason, she didn't let go, turning what was supposed to be a simple handshake into an awkwardly long period of mutual hand holding. He glanced at her and found her cheeks flushed and her eyes glassy.

"Uh... do you mind..."

"Huh?"

She looked at him and blinked a few times.

“Maybe letting go of my hand?”

“What? Oh! I didn’t— Oh my gosh! I’m sorry!”

Flustered by the realization of what she’d been doing, she quickly pulled her hand away in a panic before pointing at his face and declaring, “I... I won’t lose to you!”

Then, she spun on her heels and fled the scene, leaving him utterly baffled. She’d been acting strange ever since the field exercises concluded. It wasn’t that she was avoiding him, but every encounter between them felt like some sort of weird dance he didn’t know the steps to. Failing to decipher the meaning behind her actions, he ultimately shrugged and made his way toward the arena.

“Our contestants for the third match of the third round are Sain Fostess and Yuria Eldis!”

The commentator’s announcement was met with a roar of approval from the crowd. Inside the ring, Sain and Yuria stood facing each other.

“Contestants who’ve made it to the third round have been interviewed by the news club beforehand, so allow me to share a few tidbits.” The female commentator proceeded to read off a script containing material from the interviews. “When it comes to Sain Fostess, he’s someone who talks as big as he dreams, having proudly declared that his goal is to become the dark knight. His eccentric appearance has always been his defining feature, overshadowing any other strengths he might have had, but his steady progress through the brackets has surely shown that he’s not just all talk. However, he’s up against Yuria, who will undoubtedly be a formidable foe. His journey through the tournament may very well stop here.”

Younger children could be heard from the stands shouting their support with phrases like “Go go Darkness Dork!” The corners of Sain’s mouth twitched, unsure of whether they should curl up or down. The thought was nice, but the execution left much to be desired.

“As for Yuria Eldis, she’s the eldest daughter of Viscount Eldis, and her desire to avoid tarnishing her family’s reputation is surely pushing her to try for first place. According to the pre-match interview, she has no intention of underestimating Sain and is taking this match very seriously. What’s more surprising is that she apparently considered Sain a force to be reckoned with even before the magic battle expo started. According to her, she saw a glimpse of his true strength during the field exercises.”

That made him lift an eyebrow. He glanced at Yuria, who replied with a small smile. It was an earnest gesture, and he was glad to receive it.

I know I saw her as a worthy opponent, but it's nice to know the feeling is mutual.

“Putting their comments side by side, it's clear that both contestants see each other as a formidable foe.”

“They do indeed. It's going to be a treat to discover what strategies they've prepared against each other.”

The commentators discussed the impending match with audible enthusiasm.

“Oh, on that note, I forgot to mention something...”

The sound of papers being flipped echoed throughout the ring.

“Apparently, Sain is officially dating his attendant, Melia.”

“Am not!” shouted Sain on pure reflex.

Clearly, his words had been misconstrued at some point. His hasty denial failed to convince the spectators. A barrage of increasingly loud and hostile remarks ensued, coming from a predominantly male segment of the crowd.

“You keep your hands off our angel, punk!”

“Go to hell!”

“Block off the exits! We'll get that bastard when he comes out!”

Even from where he stood, Sain could see the burning rage in their jealous eyes as they stared daggers at him. The sheer intensity of their resentment made him break out in a cold sweat. Then, he heard a softer but equally unsettling voice from across the ring.

“...Huh?” For some reason, Yuria looked even more distraught than he did. Color drained from her face, leaving her eyes empty and lifeless. “Is that... true?”

“No, it's no—”

“Let's start the countdown!”

He was cut off by the announcement. With the countdown underway, he had to focus his thoughts on the task at hand. Yuria was no pushover. He couldn't help but notice, however, that her expression grew darker and more furious with each passing second.

“Let the match begin!”

The commentator's voice reached him almost at the same time as a bullet of solid earth.

“Whoa?!”

The surprise attack just narrowly missed hitting him as he ducked it in alarm, the motion causing him to stumble a few steps to the side. As he steadied himself, he braced for a follow-up attack, but it never came. Nervously, he peeked through his upheld arms at her.

“Unforgivable...” Shaking with rage, she fixed him with a teary glare. “I was looking forward to this match so much... But while I was spending all my time preparing, so I’d be a worthy opponent... You were busy flirting with your attendant!”

“What are you even talking about?!”

There had clearly been a terrible misunderstanding, but she didn’t give him any chance to explain.

“Crucible of swirling mud, swallow the sinking earth — Mud Grail!”

She pressed her hands to the ground, and the earth below Sain suddenly liquefied. It was the same spell she’d used during the field exercises.

“If you’re not fully invested in this match, then you’ve got no chance of winning!”

He began to sink as the swamp underfoot threatened to swallow him whole, and he had to fight down a wave of panic, forcing himself to stay calm as he pointed an open palm downwards.

“If you think I’m not fully invested, then it’s you who has to think again!” he yelled, casting *Darku Shot* in the process.

A mass of jet black projectiles slammed into the swampy tendrils and ripped them off his legs, allowing him to escape.

If I’ve seen it, I can deal with it. I’ve got countermeasures prepared for every spell she used during the field exercises.

He’d always considered Yuria a formidable opponent, so as soon as the brackets had been posted, he’d been preparing for this eventuality. Before the battle expo even started, he’d already been wracking his brains on a daily basis trying to figure out how to beat her. If that wasn’t being fully invested, then he didn’t know what was.

“Mud Shot!”

Lumps of mud flew at him in a scattershot pattern. He rushed to evade, but the mud still clinging to his shoes caused him to slip. Before he could get his feet back under him, heavy globs of fast-moving mud hit him in the shoulders, side, and shins.

“Ugh!”

He barely felt the impact, but what it lacked in pain, it made up for in immobilization. It was an approach to battle that was reminiscent of Melia. The mud — formed through compound magic of water and earth — clung to him, restricting his mobility.

“Grundia!”

It was immediately followed up by a hard-hitting projectile to take advantage of his impairment. Compared to Melia, who used mist magic to obscure enemy vision and create openings for close range dagger strikes, Yuria’s approach differed in its implementation but was fundamentally identical in concept. He managed to extend his arm at the oncoming chunk of earth just in time to cast a spell.

“Dardia!”

An orb of darkness collided with the earthen sphere. Unlike Yuria’s well-formed spell, his was hastily conjured and lacked the power to push hers back.

“I’m not going to lose like this!”

As the earthy boulder pushed through his orb, he quickly pulled out his sword and sliced at it. Weakened by its prior impact, the sphere was severed clean in two.

“So...” A soft utterance escaped Yuria’s lips as she watched the scene unfold, thoroughly mesmerized by Sain’s performance. “So dreamy...”

Her cheeks immediately flushed with color.

“...Say what?”

Sain gave her a perplexed look.

Is it just me, or did she just call me dreamy?

“Huh? What— Ah!” She gasped as though being jostled out of a dream. “You trickster! Stop trying to get in my head!”

“Say *what*?” he said, bewildered by the fact that he seemed to have provoked her outrage by doing nothing at all. “Okay, there’s clearly some horrible misunderstanding here, so let me just straighten out the rec—”

“Shush, you despicable womanizer!”

“I’m— What?! I’m no womanizer!”

Paying no attention to his protest, she held out both hands in front of her.

“Great torrent of mud, swallow the fiends that tread the miry sea — Velle Swamp!”

A massive mudslide roared into existence before Sain's eyes. This wasn't something he could just sidestep. With a grunt of effort, he broke into a sprint, committing Yuria's position to memory before she disappeared behind the raging wave of earthly muck. It surged toward him with thunderous force, but he'd run far enough for it to roll safely past him. He didn't stop there, though. He kept running, steadily closing in on the spot where he remembered Yuria standing. A second wave, larger and more powerful, came on the heels of the first, but rather than continue his evasive maneuver, he stopped in place. If his spatial memory was correct, she should have been right in front of him.

"*Dark Ray!* "

A spear of darkness shot into the wave of mud, boring a hole straight through it and coming out the other side on a perfect collision course with Yuria.

"Eek!"

The mudslide weakened as soon as she shrieked, signaling that her concentration had been broken. With the spell unraveling, Sain saw his chance.

"I've got you now!"

"Ugh! *Alchemia!* "

True to his original plan, he brought the fight to her, closing in for melee combat. She rushed to create an earthen sword in response. Their blades ground against each other, locking them into a clash. As they each pushed against the other, their eyes met.

"You're stronger than you were during the field exercises. I see you've improved," she said.

"Yeah. I've put in plenty of work since then."

"...Plenty of work *flirting* , maybe."

"Damn it, I told you that was a misunderstanding."

After an intense staredown, they broke off the clash, both leaping back a few steps. Sain then declared in a voice loud enough for all the spectators to hear, "My maid and I do *not* have that kind of relationship."

Yuria regarded him with wide, hesitantly-wishful eyes.

"Do you... really mean that?"

"Absolutely. I said it before the match, and I'll say it again. My goal is to become the dark knight. Right now, that is my sole and singular focus. I have no time to be dabbling in any other matters."

Her expression blossomed into a broad smile.

“You’re serious, aren’t you? You really are trying to become the dark knight...”

“I absolutely am.”

As she beheld his earnest, determined gaze, she let out an enamored sigh and visibly swooned.

“...So *dreamy* .”

He lifted an eyebrow, finding himself baffled by her actions for the umpteenth time today.

“Uh, what?”

“I’ve never felt like this before,” she explained. “For as long as I can remember, winning was what mattered to me. The only thing I cared about was my own victory. But now... I really want to see how far you can go. It’s... a strange feeling. I never thought I’d become so invested in someone else... to want to cheer them on so much. And to feel good while doing it.”

Honest admiration flowed from her soft, kindly voice. She meant what she said.

“And that’s why,” she continued, “I’m going to concede.”

Sain watched dumbfounded as she raised her hand and held it up in an indication of surrender.

“C-Could this be what I think it is? Is Yuria throwing in the towel?”

While Sain was still struggling to make sense of the gesture, the female commentator quickly caught on and looked at Yuria to verify her intent. Upon seeing her nod calmly, she turned to the audience to announce the conclusion of the match.

“That’s it! The match is over, and the winner is Sain! I have no idea what just happened... but it seems like Yuria has decided to surrender the match! To me, it looked like she could still keep going, but it’s certainly possible that she’s having some difficulties we’re not aware of!”

Contestants in the ring had to really project their voices to be heard in the stands, so the discourse between Sain and Yuria during the match was audible only to themselves. As a result, much of the audience was bewildered by her decision. Amidst a confused uproar in the crowd, she approached him and whispered in his ear.

“Sir Sain, I’d just like you to know that I’ve fallen for your strength.”

With that, she left the arena, leaving him to puzzle out the meaning of her cryptic message for himself.

“W-Well then... You don’t see a match ending like that everyday,” said a frowning Alicia.

She and the other two girls had been watching from the stands.

“Now the question is whether that’s going to throw him off his game,” remarked Melia. “Hopefully not.”

“It’s a valid concern though...” added Marni. “Sain has a tendency to overthink things.”

All three girls agreed that an unexpected win of this nature ran the risk of lingering unhealthily in Sain’s mind. The match ended in an awkwardly unsatisfying fashion, and his candid nature might very well work against him in this regard, causing him to question himself and consider the victory unearned.

“Still, this means he made it into the semifinals.”

“Yeah, and the next match is going to decide his opponent.”

Soon, they would find out whether he would be up against Melia or Cain.

“I’m going to get ready for my match, then,” said Melia as she stood up.

Unlike the first day, which was crammed full of matches, the schedule for the later days was looser. Contestants had been notified that they could wait until the previous match was over before heading to the waiting room. Arena maintenance was carried out in the downtime, which was necessary due to the increasing intensity of the matches as they entered their second day. The remaining contestants were of higher caliber and their spells packed more destructive potential, as evidenced by the fissures Sain and Yuria had left in the ground during the match, which arena staff were in the process of repairing.

“I have to start moving, so could you hand these to Master Sain?”

“Sure.”

Alicia took a towel and a beverage from Melia.

“Huh. Did you make this drink yourself?”

“I sure did. It’s easy to wear yourself out during the battle expo, so it’s important to be diligent in treating fatigue. I’ve got a whole action plan drawn out for smoothly getting nutrients back into him after a good workout.”

“Wow... He’s so lucky to have a maid like you. Capable *and* dedicated.”

“It’s only normal. I do owe him more than I can ever repay, after all.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Oh, it’s nothing special,” said Melia, patting down her uniform nonchalantly. “A long time ago, he took me in when I’d lost myself to rage and despair after Chaos killed my family. You know, the usual.”

“You... *what*? Wait, are you serious?” exclaimed Alicia, her eyes wide with surprise.

“Maybe. The point is, I owe him a lot.”

Then she strolled off toward the waiting room, leaving Alicia to wonder just how much of what she said was true. A few minutes later, Sain returned. Since Melia’s match was going to be in the same arena, there was no need for them to relocate.

“Oh, hey, there you are.”

Marni nodded at him.

“Congratulations, Sain... on reaching the semifinals.”

He sat down beside them with a sigh and shook his head.

“Yeah, thanks, but I have to say, that was the kind of win that leaves a sour aftertaste.”

“Hey, Sain.” Alicia gave him a concerned look. “Is it true that Melia lost her family to Chaos a long time ago?”

The question took him by surprise, and for a while, he stared wordlessly at her in astonishment. Eventually, he figured that the only way Alicia could have known was for Melia to divulge her past herself. Slowly, he nodded.

“Yeah... it’s true. It’s probably hard for the two of you to imagine... but she wasn’t always the unflappable maid she is now. She used to be... wilder. Almost feral. And she had very little regard for her own life.”

Even now, she could still remember the day in vivid detail — when Chaos had shown up and robbed a little girl of her family.

Her home had been in a small village, and she’d led a modest life with her friends and family. Times were tough and luxuries were few, but despite the hardship, the village folk were a tight-knit bunch, weathering adversity through mutual aid and support. Life wasn’t easy, but they were happy to live it.

Then, one day, Chaos appeared out of the blue. Calamity followed. They swept through the village in a storm of death and destruction. People fell left and right, mauled and eaten before they could even comprehend

their fate, much less curse it. Before she could process what was even happening, the village was gone. Everyone she'd ever known was dead.

Eight-year-old Melia was the sole survivor of her village. She'd hidden herself in the family trunk at her mother's instruction. Then, too scared to even breathe loudly, she waited and waited for what felt like an eternity until the blood-curdling howls of Chaos finally ceased. Slowly, she crawled out of the trunk and, stumbling forward on numb, unsteady legs, bore witness to the carnage that had taken place. There was no village left; only death and debris. As her eyes took in the mutilated bodies of everyone she cared about, her mind pushed away all its thoughts and feelings save for one — revenge.

She knew her enemy was Chaos, and she knew they had to be exterminated. She swore in her heart to do so. However, despite their tendency to appear when they were least welcome, the creatures were confoundingly difficult to find when she tried to go looking for them. After a lengthy period of wandering, she was picked up by a passing merchant who'd seen the ruins of her village. After arriving at a nearby town, she began working at a local tavern. When she wasn't on duty, she spent every waking moment trying to track down Chaos, but to no avail. As more and more time passed, with few clues as to their whereabouts, her disposition grew steadily grimmer. Despair began to infect her still-bleeding heart, festering insidiously in its wounds.

Still, vengeance continued to drive her, and during her fruitless search for her enemy, she never stopped seeking strength. Killing the creatures would require a weapon, and she had no qualms about turning herself into one. Fortunately — or, perhaps, tragically — she was naturally clever and a quick learner. While working to keep herself fed, she also found the time to teach herself how to fight. She went on solo expeditions into the wilderness, learning to trap and hunt through trial and error. Eventually, she turned her attention from wildlife to monsters and, without the knowledge of the adults around her, began fighting them for practice. The monsters she killed were not left out to rot. Instead, she dissected their carcasses to learn more about their anatomy and makeup. Eschewing neither knowledge nor skill, she hungrily sought to improve her capabilities in every way possible and honed her very person into the lethal weapon with which she would exact her revenge.

For half a year, she continued to bide her time, getting ever stronger in the process. Then, one day, word of blood-red monsters being sighted nearby entered her ears, eliciting a visceral rush of excitement. They had to be Chaos. The time had finally come. Every nerve in her body buzzed with violent energy, urging her to move, to act, to kill.

She got there too late. By the time she arrived at the reported location, she found only another ruined village. It was as if the scene from her memory had been transplanted into reality. There she was, again, standing alone amidst the devastation of her hometown.

A few months later, the experience repeated itself. Once again, Chaos had passed through. Once again, a village had been decimated. Her resolve hardened, and her eyes grew grimmer still. Chaos, she decided, was something that needed to be eradicated by whatever means necessary.

Months passed again until finally, the day came when she came face to face with a living creature of Chaos.

Kill it... Kill it! It needs to die!

Reason faded from her mind, replaced by a singular desire to see the thing dead. She picked up a pointed branch on the ground and rushed at it without another thought.

“Don’t.”

Three steps into her reckless charge, she was stopped by a young boy in a pure white mantle.

“You can’t kill Chaos with a stick like that.”

The boy had fine features, with a pair of deep blue eyes and a crop of golden hair. He looked to be about the same age as her, but he carried himself with an air of maturity. Startled by his sudden appearance, she nevertheless managed to reply to him.

“...Says who? I won’t know unless I try.”

“You might not, but unfortunately, I do. You’re fivekind, aren’t you? Chaos can only be harmed by light or dark magic. Therefore, you cannot defeat it.”



She struggled to process what he said. Most of it was jargon wholly unfamiliar to her. She hadn't heard anyone refer to the creatures by name. It was, in fact, the first time she'd heard the term "Chaos." She spared him a suspicious glance. Then, she looked back toward the creature and began inching toward it, her stick held at the ready.

"But... I see that won't stop you from trying," said the boy, his voice neither derisive nor reproachful. "This is personal, isn't it? Very well. In that case, be my attendant."

She stopped and gave him a perplexed look.

"Your... attendant?"

"Becoming my attendant will allow you to use light magic. That way, you'll be able to fight Chaos. However... I'll allow you to do so only on the condition that you promise me something."

The boy paused for a breath before the gravity in his voice deepened.

"I need you to promise me... that you won't indulge any self-destructive tendencies. I do not wish to see you die."

Melia didn't understand what he meant by that, but nevertheless, she took him up on his offer. Entering into contract as the young boy's attendant, she then learned that he was the holy knight, Sain, upon whom the goddess had conferred her blessing. By transferring some of the blessing to Melia, he granted her the ability to use light magic, which she employed in concert with his power to defeat the Chaos that had been destroying the local villages.

After the conclusion of their battle, Sain made her another offer.

"If you don't have a place to call home, do you want to come live with me?"

"Huh? Wasn't that part of the plan in the first place?" said Melia with mild surprise. There was clearly a discrepancy in their interpretations of the contract. "You said 'attendant,' so I thought for sure I was going to be your maid or something."

"Ah, I see. That's... certainly one way to interpret it. My apologies for the confusion. By 'attendant,' I was actually speaking in reference to the power of the holy knight. I didn't mean it in, uh... that way. Now that I think about it though, that would be a decent arrangement. You seem a little... insensitive to danger, and it worries me. I'd rather put you in a place where I can keep an eye on you... All right, then. I'm officially making you my maid."

“No.”

“Too bad. You have no say in this matter.”

Figuring she had no need to accept an extra condition he’d attached to the offer after the fact, she refused, only to have her objection overruled.

“From now on, you’re officially my maid.”

Thus began Melia’s employment as Sain’s maid. After they returned to his residence, she started by tidying up her appearance. She took a comb to her disheveled hair, working it into proper form, and began wearing a miniature maid uniform. Her duties primarily consisted of looking after Sain until, one day, he instructed her to devote some time to her own studies. Looking over the small mountain of homework he’d left her, she pushed her lips out in displeasure.

“Doing this won’t make me any better at killing Chaos.”

“No, but it’ll make you better at life.”

She could tell that his words carried weight, but their meaning was lost on her. Nevertheless, she complied, and as time went on, she discovered the utility of academics. When she went shopping, she could calculate prices in her head, and organizing documents and reports was far easier when she had the knowledge base to understand their contents. More and more, her work changed from something she simply did to something she wanted to do. It gave her motivation and a sense of worth. One day, she looked back and realized that she’d become a different person altogether.

When, she wondered, had the vengeful Melia who lived only to kill Chaos been replaced by a gentler one who’d discovered the simple joys of a peaceful life?

When, she wondered, had she become less concerned with honing herself into a weapon against Chaos than learning how to make a perfect cup of black tea?

She didn’t know. But she didn’t mind, either. The truth was that she’d always been a gentle soul, but Chaos had derailed her life and twisted her personality, forcing her to don the avenger’s mask to keep herself from falling apart. Her cold resolve had been a front — one that Sain must have seen through on the day they’d met. Slowly but surely, the peaceful days she spent with Sain became a cherished part of her life. Even now, every memory she recalled filled her with pride and joy.

“Our contestants for the fourth match of the third round will be Melia and Cain Theresia!”

The reverberating voice of the commentator pulled her out of her reverie.

“Melia happens to be the attendant of Sain, whom we just saw in the third match. Treat her like any other attendant, though, and you’ll regret it. Her ability to freely make use of compound magic — a feat rarely seen even among fivekind — puts her on an entirely different level. It’s arguable that her strength has already surpassed that of a mere student.”

During the commentator’s brief introduction, she turned toward the stands and bowed politely. This elicited a round of cheers.

“However,” continued the commentator, “she is up against Cain Theresia, whose capabilities also far outstrip his status. Despite being a student, it’s said that he might be one of the five most powerful people in the kingdom. I’m not aware of anyone who’s better at using light magic than he is! Will this match end as a clean sweep in his favor as well?!”

In terms of pure power possessed by an individual, it was true that Cain’s mastery of light magic might indeed be without equal. He gave no reaction to his introduction, choosing instead to regard Melia with silent intensity. The countdown began.

“So, Mr. Student Council President, can I make one request?” asked Melia right before the match began.

Cain lifted his eyebrow at her.

“If I win,” she continued, “I’d like you to apologize for the things you said about Master Sain.”

Cain had insulted Sain the other day. That fact lingered at the forefront of Melia’s mind, adamantly refusing to fade.

“Very well. But...” He smiled with a confidence completely unmarred by doubt. “Like I told you before, you won’t win. Not against me.”

The countdown hit zero just as he finished his sentence.

“Let the match begin!”

Melia burst into motion immediately, generating mist through her trademark compound magic of fire and water.

“Sprites of crystalline veil, roam the endless mist — Londo Mysteria!”

A white haze filled the space around them. Moving with silent steps, she circled behind him. Then, before she could strike, there was a blinding flash.

“Lighto.”

He threw a beginner-level light spell at her. The thick mist permeating the ring should have prevented both of them from relying on sight to track each other, but his aim was somehow spot on. Whatever he was doing, it gave him an exceptional ability to sense his opponent's whereabouts. Fortunately, it was still a beginner-level spell, and she had little difficulty dodging the glowing bullet before countering with her own spell.

“Lost souls gathered, scream in fear, die a shapeless death — Death Ripper!”

The dagger in her right hand melted into mist. Her second spell, *Death Ripper*, allowed her to freely materialize her weapon wherever she wished, so long as the space was filled with mist. The short blade reappeared directly behind Cain, only for him to sense its presence immediately and bend his body with surprising pliancy to avoid the strike.

“Vright.”

A massive orb of light flew toward Melia, illuminating the entirety of the ring through even the thick mist. She squinted at its sheer luminance and lunged sideways out of its path. It exploded behind her, sending out a shockwave that cleared away the cloud of mist.

“Geez, do you have eyes on your back or something?”

His reply came in the form of an outstretched palm in her direction.

“Lighto Shot.”

A swarm of glowing pellets flew at her at blinding speed. She entered into a run, waiting until just before the moment of impact to flip high into the air, clearing the barrage like a high jumper.

“...An impressive escape,” murmured Cain.

After an aerial rotation, she landed cleanly on her feet and swiftly followed up with another spell.

“Spirits of turbid water, grasp what you seek — Wortu Halden!”

Numerous watery arms erupted from the ground beneath his feet. They grasped at his arms and legs in an effort to hold him down.

“Lighto Shot.”

Their advance was repelled by a barrage of glowing pellets, but reinforcements came in the form of Melia herself, who dashed into melee range and swung at him with her dagger. A thrust, a chop, and an upward swing all failed to find their mark, but she continued her offensive while simultaneously controlling the water arms to grab at his heels.

“Ray Javelin. ”

He took a great leap backwards and, still completely unscathed, brought a massive spear of light into existence. She immediately ceased attacking and shifted into an evasive maneuver. The spear slammed into the pool of liquid appendages, vaporizing both them and a large chunk of the ground. Dirt and debris filled the air. As dust swirled, she took a moment to catch her breath.

“...I see,” murmured Cain as he regarded her, daggers raised and still ready to fight. “Impressive indeed. As the holy knight’s attendant, you certainly live up to your name.”

“Ah... So you caught on to that part, too.”

“I’d be a fool not to. Every spell I’ve used, you’ve dodged without so much as a glance in my direction. I see that your time with the holy knight was not spent in vain... Clearly, you’re intimately familiar with the particulars of light magic.”

Melia didn’t have a single scratch on her, either, having perfectly evaded every one of Cain’s spells. There was a trick to that, though. She’d made sure to recognize any movement on his part that suggested he was casting a spell. As a result, by the time the spell materialized, she was already moving to evade it. Her years of service to the holy knight had allowed her to observe in action every form of light magic. She only needed to catch a glimpse of its beginnings to tell what spell was coming her way.

“Flash like serpent’s fangs — Lighto Whip .”

A whip of light appeared in Cain’s right hand. With a crack, its glowing tendril lashed out at Melia, who quickly ducked under the strike and, keeping her posture low, rushed in to close the distance. Undaunted by her approach, he twisted his wrist, causing the end of his weapon to abruptly change course and come whipping back toward her. Despite its sudden reversal in motion, she read its trajectory perfectly and, knowing it was going to strike her from behind, brushed it away with the dagger in her right hand.

“Sprites of crystalline veil, roam the endless mist — Londo Mysteria! ”

Mist erupted from her again, hiding her form. She stayed wary of any motion from his direction as she began her next spell.

“Swirling vicissitudes of mist, converge into a phantom of destruction ...”

The mist around her began to gather into a vortex around her right arm.

“Deafen the smoldering battlefield with your roar — Mist Wyrms !”

The dense cyclone of mist erupted from her arm with all the force of a siege cannon. It sent violent gusts swirling through the arena and carved deep fissures into the ground as it closed in on Cain.

“Great torrent of light, blind the land with an argent sea — Velle Wright .”

A vast tide of light swallowed the misty blast.

“Ugh!”

Two titanic forces collided, unleashing a shockwave that sent Melia tumbling. When she got back up, the *Mist Wyrms* was no more, and Cain remained where he’d been before the blast, standing like a statue.

“Not even close,” he said disdainfully as he fixed her with the gaze of a lion. “No matter how nimbly you dance around my spells, it does not change the fact that mine are fundamentally stronger. You can run from my magic... but you can never stop it.”

“...Somehow, every time you say something, I like you a little less.”

She had no intention of telling him this, but *Mist Wyrms* was her strongest attack. Anything stronger would require access to her powers as the holy knight’s attendant. In other words, she’d just played her trump card, and he’d shaken it off without batting an eye. That got her sweating.

“I’d love to know what kind of epic life you’ve had to live to get that strong.”

Her question seemed to rouse him.

“...What kind of life? You should know that better than anyone, seeing as yours was identical to mine.”

“...What do you mean by that?”

“You and I,” he said in a voice firm as stone, “we both had our families taken from us by Chaos.”

Melia’s eyes went wide. Her shock was twofold; Cain sharing the same trauma as her was surprising enough, but she couldn’t fathom how he knew about *her* past.

“Just so you know,” he added, “I didn’t dig up your life story. There was no need. Knowing that you’re a fivekind who became an attendant of the holy knight, I simply inferred the rest.”

“...You’re saying you just bluffed me?”

“It’s not so much a bluff as a statement of inferred fact, albeit one I was completely confident in.” He looked her straight in the eyes. “I *know* you.

You hold within you the same unbearable hatred as I. I can see it in your eyes.”

It was then that Melia saw herself in his eyes as well. It was her, but younger, with a look she knew all too well — a look she saw in a pond’s reflection after Chaos had robbed her of her family, and a look she saw in the mirror day after day when Sain had just taken her in.

She swallowed. All of a sudden, she felt like she understood; she knew the source of Cain’s overwhelming strength.

“But,” he continued, disdain entering his voice, “what we share in experience, we differ in make. We were forged in the same fire, but we’re hardly the same blade.”

His form blurred. She quickly swung her arm backward and barely managed to block a strike from behind her with her dagger.

“Ugh!”

“If Chaos were to attack us now,” he said as he laid into her with a barrage of glowing bullets, “could you protect all those around you? Do you have what it takes to keep everyone safe from their vicious maws?”

She blocked the first volley, but their sheer number overwhelmed her defense, slamming into her and sending her flying.

“Of course you don’t. You’re weak. You’ll fail them. And you’ll have little choice but to watch as they die in front of your eyes.”

She pushed herself up from a roll and thrust her palm out at him.

“Londo Mysteria!”

“Vright.”

Only a few tendrils of mist managed to form before a massive orb of light plowed through them and crashed into her.

“Augh?!”

Every fiber of her body flared with pain, and she crumpled to the ground.

“This, you see, is the end of your road — the ultimate consequence of relying on the holy knight. It is the difference between me, who has lived solely for revenge, and you, who have forgotten your vengeance and indulged in the false promise of peace.” He towered over the flattened form of Melia as she struggled to get up, and spoke down to her. “Seeing you is like seeing a soft and complacent form of myself, and it disgusts me to no end.”

That was the last thing Melia heard before feeling herself crushed by a sphere of light.

The seventh match of the third round ended in Cain Theresia's victory. His opponent, Melia, fell unconscious after suffering damage that exceeded the absorption capacity of her substitute pendant and had to be immediately carted off to the infirmary.

"...Good thing she's not too badly hurt," said Alicia as she sat down beside the bed where Melia slept.

She hadn't suffered any grave injuries, and her unconscious state seemed to be related to the location of impact rather than degree of damage. According to the person who treated her, she should wake up before long.

"Excuse me."

They heard a female voice behind them before the infirmary door opened and Emilia stepped in. She approached them.

"Sain... The president would like to see you."

"Cain wants to see me?"

She nodded. He had no idea what business Cain could possibly have with him at the moment, but he rose and followed her out of the infirmary, leaving Alicia and Marni to look after Melia. They arrived at the student council office and Emilia knocked on the door.

"Here at last," said a voice in the room.

She opened the door, and as they walked through, Cain fixed Sain with a narrow-eyed gaze. The president leaned forward on his chair and said, "Emilia, could you step out for a minute?"

"...Okay."

She lowered her head and retreated from the room, leaving the two boys alone in the office. A few seconds of silence ensued, after which Sain was the first to speak.

"That match just now... It was already done. You didn't need to hurt her like that. Why did you do it?"

"Because she needed to know her folly."

Sain held back a snarl.

"What are you talking about? What folly?"

"She lost sight of reality. I simply had her feel its weight again," he said, the statement no less cryptic than the one before. "And as for why I've

brought you here today... It is to give you a reminder. Or, perhaps a warning. To stop meddling in my business.”

“...Meddling in your business?”

“Yes. Go do your holy knighting elsewhere. Stop getting in my way.”

Sain feigned confusion with a frown, but Cain was unmoved.

“...That’s quite the claim you’re making.”

“Not a claim. A fact. Please, let us drop this ridiculous pretense.”

Sain slowly exhaled. His cover had been blown. He didn’t know how exactly it had happened, but his actions during the field exercises last month certainly gave Cain plenty of reasons to be suspicious. The uncomfortable amount of attention he’d been receiving from Cain since then was proof of that.

“Holy knight. You’re aware, I assume, that this academy is protected by an enormous barrier?”

“...Yeah. It’s using a gigantic staff as a focus.”

Cain nodded before continuing.

“As you probably know, that instrument is called the titan’s staff. It was created by people of ancient times to assist the gods, and it’s infused with an enormous amount of power.”

Sain nodded back. This was consistent with what he’d heard from the headmaster.

“However, the enormous power it holds also makes it a target, and the Clan of Chaos is currently trying to get their hands on it.”

“What?”

“It’s been three months since you came to this school. By now, you should have noticed how frequently Chaos shows up around here. Doesn’t that strike you as odd? The reason is presumably the titan’s staff. They want it for themselves. Not for supporting the gods, of course, but opposing them. They intend to use the staff to weaken the gods and expand their influence.”

The two gods, Vicitaelia and Shartegallia, had been pouring power into the seal that kept Chaos suppressed for a long time. Weakening their power would allow more Chaos into the world.

“They can’t be allowed to do that...”

“Correct. That is why I am here. To protect the staff. You,” he said with a tone of finality, “should go mind your own business.”

Sain furrowed his brows. The whole picture had finally become clear to him. It just didn't make any sense.

"Hold on a minute. If what you told me is true, then it seems to me that we're on the same side. If we're both fighting against Chaos, then it would only make sense for us to join hands."

"I will *not* join hands with you," he snarled. "I don't trust the holy knight."

There was a deep anger in his voice. This, Sain realized, was personal. He wasn't about to back down without a proper answer, though.

"Why?"

Cain drew in a long breath before answering.

"Because Chaos murdered my little sister."

Then, he told his story.

"As you surely know, there are seven special entities of Chaos known as the Founders. They are, of course, each bound by their own seal... but do you know when the last Founder was sealed? It was about ten years ago, before you became the holy knight. Your predecessor had subdued the last Founder, and he did manage to seal it, but not before a careless mistake allowed it to escape for a time. A minor mishap, you might think, and it only happened once. But once was enough for it to murder my little sister, who just happened to be passing by."

Sain's eyes widened. He opened his mouth but no words came. Cain continued, paying little attention to his reaction.

"I asked him. I went to him holding her lifeless body, and I asked him how it had come to this. And what do you think he said?" He let out a short, scornful laugh. "Because he looked away for a second. That was it. My little sister died because he couldn't be bothered to keep his eyes in one place. It was so absurd. So profoundly *stupid* that it wasn't even worth my rage."

He looked straight at Sain.

"You holy knights hold great power, and that power makes you careless, the price of which is paid not by yourselves, but the ordinary people around you. I refuse to accept this as the way of things. That is why I sought power — the power to kill Chaos on my own."

All the pieces finally fell into place. Sain now understood where Cain's extraordinary power came from. He'd been certain that it had been the

result of a great deal of blood, sweat, and tears. He just didn't know the saying had applied to him literally.

"...I see where you're coming from now. And you make a fair point. Still, it's no reason to be going it alone— Wait, what's that?"

His attempt at persuasion was cut short by the sudden presence of Chaos outside the school grounds.

"That... is what you call good timing," said Cain, a hint of a smile appearing across his lips.

He walked over to the exit, picked up his sword leaning against the wall, and pulled open the door.

"I am not your ally, holy knight, and I have no intention of becoming one," he spat before leaving the room.

"Huh? Cain?"

His sudden exit startled Emilia, who had been waiting outside.

"I'll be out for a while. You're in charge of handling my tasks until I return."

"W-Wait! Where are you going?!" she asked, a trace of desperation in her voice.

He shot her a look of annoyance and said simply, "It's none of your business."

His wintry countenance forced her to swallow the rest of her questions, and she could do little but watch in despondent silence as he walked off. The sight of her made Cain bite his lip.

"Look, uh..." he said, approaching the crestfallen Emilia. "Don't worry too much. It's him we're talking about. He'll be fine."

The Chaos he sensed were all Beasts, which occupied the lowest level on their hierarchy of power. While Cain had sustained significant injuries during the field exercises, that could be attributed to the presence of much stronger forms of Chaos. The ones that had shown up this time shouldn't give him any trouble.

He turned away from Emilia, hoping his reassurance provided some comfort, and made for the building's exit.

"Goddess," he said as he ran down the stairs, "is it true that the previous holy knight let a Founder slip, resulting in the death of an innocent?"

"...Yes, it's true." Her ghostly form appeared beside him and nodded with a solemn expression. "*It tormented your predecessor until the very*

end. Just a moment's inattention — it really was just a brief moment — but in the end... it caused the death of someone who never should have died."

"I see..."

Cain had said it was about ten years ago when his sister was killed. That placed the incident at about a year or so before Sain was given the power of the holy knight. Sain hadn't been there. He wasn't the one responsible. But he did inherit the title of the one who was, and that was more than enough reason for him to be the target of Cain's ire.

"...One step at a time. Let's solve the problem at hand first," he muttered as he tapped into the power of his holy mantle.

Melia drifted in and out of sleep as she relived the events of the past few days. Ever since the end of her match with Cain, her mind had been ruminating on all the past memories it kept dredging up. She'd lived her life with few regrets, and she especially treasured the time she'd spent with Sain. It was of immeasurable value to her — value that Cain had refuted in only a few words.

"You and I, we both had our families taken from us by Chaos."

His words echoed, their impact entirely undiminished. Never had she imagined his story mirrored hers. Both of them had lost their families to Chaos, leading to a deep-seated hatred that hardened their resolve to hone themselves into a lethal weapon of revenge. There was, however, a major difference between them.

"This, you see, is the end of your road — the ultimate consequence of relying on the holy knight. It is the difference between me, who has lived solely for revenge, and you, who have forgotten your vengeance and indulged in the false promise of peace."

He'd declared that she'd reached the end of her road. In essence, he'd told her that her way of life was in error. And, somehow, she couldn't manage to say a single word back at him. It wasn't just because she'd blacked out soon after. Her mind was working now, and she still had no rebuttal. As she pondered the cause, the simplest answer became harder and harder to ignore.

Maybe it's because he's right.

She swam back up the stream of memories toward the day when she'd first become the holy knight's attendant. Why had she done so? What was her original goal?

I remember now... My original goal was to—

“Melia!”

A familiar voice entered her ears as she slowly came to.

“Oh, good, you’re finally awake.”

“...We were worried about you.”

To her side, Alicia and Marni simultaneously breathed out a sigh of relief. She slowly sat up and looked around.

“...Where am I?”

“The infirmary. You, um, passed out during the match against Cain,” explained a hesitant Alicia.

“Ah... I did, didn’t I?”

After her loss, she’d held on to a thin strand of consciousness that was slowly recovering, which brought with it an improving awareness of both her surroundings and the fact that she hurt all over. It felt like the wounds she’d sustained during the match were waking up, as well.

“Hold on, I’ll go get a doctor,” said Marni as she got up.

Just then, a voice rang in Melia’s head.

“Can you hear me?”

It was Sain. He was using the holy knight’s power to telepathically communicate with her from somewhere else.

“Sorry. Emergency situation. Chaos just showed up.”

Melia glanced at Alicia, and the two traded a knowing look. Marni, not privy to the silent announcement, frowned at the sudden change in their expressions.

“...Alicia? What’s wrong?”

“It looks like some Chaos just appeared. I’ll go with Sain to deal with them.”

“...I’ll go too then.”

Alicia nodded and relayed Marni’s intention to Sain.

“Sain, Marni’s coming to help too.”

“Got it.”

Ever since the field exercises, Marni had joined them in hunting down Chaos on many occasions. As an expert in dark magic, her abilities proved extremely useful.

—“*Maid, you stay there and rest. The three of us will handle it this time*” echoed Sain’s worried voice before Melia quickly cut him off.

“No, I’ll fight too.”

“But you’re not fully recovered yet, are you?”

“Nothing hurts that badly. Thanks for your concern, but I’ll be fine.”

“...Fine. But don’t push yourself, okay?”

Their line of mental communication ended. Melia promptly got out of bed and started preparing for battle.

“Sain’s right,” said Alicia. “Don’t go overboard, okay? If things get a little crazy, remember that we’re here too.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll be just fine,” answered Melia.

Her lips formed the crescent of a smile, but her eyes remained still.

There were a total of ten Beasts.

As Sain rushed out of the school grounds, he recalled the conversation he’d had with Cain in the student council office. The enemy was after the titan’s staff that was powering the academy’s barrier. That explained the frequency with which they’d been attacking. It was definitely true that Chaos had a noticeable tendency to show up around the school.

“Sain!”

The girls caught up to him when he reached the main gate.

“Alicia! Melia!”

He spoke their names, unleashing their latent attendant powers.

“What’s the plan?” asked Alicia as an aura of light magic emanated from her. “Should we split up?”

“No, the Chaos are moving around in groups this time. They’re to the west and south—”

He paused in the middle of his sentence when he realized the presence of one of the Chaos in the west faded as he spoke. Cain had probably killed one of them.

“We’ll head south.”

Alica, Melia, and Marni nodded at his instructions and ran with him for about a minute before they found their group of Beasts. He immediately pulled his sword from his waist and drove it through the closest one.

“Give me a hand with these!” he shouted.

“On it!”

Alicia caught one approaching from the right with her holy fire, reducing it to ash.

“Great torrent of darkness, drown the land in seas of black — Velle Darku! ”

A Beast charging at him from the left was swallowed by Marni's dark magic. Another one leapt into the air right in front of him.

"Siem Saevas, here I bear the attendant's mark. Second gift — Holy Sinking Blade!"

Melia jumped up as well and met it in midair. She tore through it with her glowing daggers before hitting the ground in a run as she quickly located her next target. A monkey-like Beast was ahead a little to the right. It stood there frozen, still processing what had happened. She dashed toward it at breakneck speed, shifting her body left and right in the process to produce a zigzag effect. Her motion confused the Beast and prevented it from reacting in time to her approach. Her blade flashed. By the time the Beast's head fell, she was already moving toward another one.

"...Melia?"

Sain watched her with a look of concern. Something about the way she was fighting felt off. At first, he'd assumed it was a bit of extra enthusiasm to prove she was fine, but it soon became apparent that wasn't the case. Melia always fought with a kind of aplomb that almost dared her enemies to step it up and actually challenge her a little. That sense of confident composure was absent in her today. She fought with urgency, as though pressed by some invisible deadline.

"...Next!" she huffed as she moved in a lethal blur from Beast to Beast, leaving a trail of sweat and corpses in her wake. However, her still-frail body couldn't keep up with such intense and continuous demand. Her strength failed her just as she reached one of them, and her legs gave way. The Beast saw its opening and pounced. The shadow of its massive claw blotted out the sky, and she heard the deadly swish as it swiped at her neck.

"Are you okay?"

Sain stood before her, his sword held steady against the offending claw. He looked backward and gave her a look of concern.

"...Yes, I'm fine."

"Good... But stay closer to us. You're running too far ahead."

He pushed the claw away with a powerful swing that curved back into the Beast and split it in two. It was a rare blunder from Melia. Beasts of Chaos, lowly as they were in ranking, nevertheless posed a very real threat. They had to be engaged in a calm, deliberate fashion. She knew this, but for some reason, she wasn't her usual self today; she'd lost her cool. The Beast

he just dispatched should have been no problem for her had she dealt with it in her usual composed manner.

He figured it must be the lingering effects of her tournament match. She was still weary, both in body and soul. Things might be different if she'd won, but unfortunately, she didn't, and her loss was probably weighing heavily on her mind.

"Poht Teurch, here I bear the attendant's mark. Seventh gift — Holy Weaving Torch!"

A blazing torch of holy fire materialized in Alicia's hand. This kind of situation was exactly why she'd refrained from participating in the magic battle expo — so she'd be rested and ready to respond. A wave of purifying flames swept through the remaining Beasts.

"Phew... I think that's the last of them."

"...No."

The numbers didn't match up. There had been more when he'd first sensed them. A few must have noticed his approach and fled in advance. They had to be hunted down immediately.

"Found them. They're that way."

Melia was first to detect their presence. She dashed off immediately.

"Wha— Damn it, wait! Melia!"

Sain hastily rushed after her as she charged toward potentially hostile territory by herself. Something was definitely wrong with her today. She lacked all composure. It felt like the only thing that mattered to her right now was killing Chaos.

His pondering was cut short when two Beasts — the group's leftovers — closed in on Melia's distant figure. In a display of her usual dexterity, she danced circles around one of them as she cut it down in a flurry of slashes. But...

"Wha—?!"

...The other one managed to get behind her and catch her unawares as it attacked. The lion-shaped Beast charged at her, and she only managed to get her arms up in a defensive stance before it rammed her with its body, sending her crashing into a tree. She let out a short but pained groan, then immediately moved to counterattack.

"I said stop!"

Sain finally caught up and halted her with a holler. In the process, he also pulled the lion-shaped Beast's attention to himself. It pounced.

“Whoa!”

He jerked back, narrowly avoiding a powerful jaw that tried to close around his head, and sliced through the creature’s torso with his sword of light. It fell to the ground. Only after confirming it was dead did he let out a breath.

“I told you not to push yourself.”

“I...”

She looked at him and blinked a few times before her eyes widened with the realization that she’d gone a little berserk. He let her chew on that for a while as he scanned the surroundings and confirmed that there were no remaining Chaos. Their presence to the west was completely gone as well, presumably eradicated by Cain. He took out his accessory-shaped light seals and put them back on one by one, reducing his power down to its usual suppressed state. Then, he addressed her.

“All right, talk to me, Maid. What happened?”

“Nothing really. If I have to say something, then I’ll go with... I went back to being my original self.”

She kept her eyes on the ground and avoided meeting his gaze.

“...What do you mean by that?”

“I became an attendant of the holy knight to kill Chaos. That was my original purpose,” she explained. “But something changed. At some point, when I looked in the mirror, I stopped seeing the holy knight’s attendant. I saw *your* attendant, Master Sain. Your attendant, who was enjoying her peaceful life with you. I always took it for granted that the change was for the better... but now that I think about it, maybe I just lost sight of my goal. Maybe I... betrayed my original purpose.”

“...Nonsense. Fighting Chaos isn’t all there is to your life. It shouldn’t define you.”

“But the consequence of that change was my loss to Cain Theresia. Our past circumstances were the same, yet he ended up trouncing me. That’s the cold, hard truth.” Anger crept into her voice as she talked, and her fists tightened. “At first, we both thought of ourselves as weapons, but while I indulged in a false promise of peace and allowed myself to dull, that man kept training. He never let go of his vengeance, and he let it fuel his drive to keep pushing his limits. It’s hardly a surprise that I lost to him. If you ask me which one of us chose the correct path in life... I think his victory proves it was him.”

Melia smiled with bitter self-derision.

“...Is that what he told you?”

She said nothing. Her silence told him all he needed to know. He’d noticed that her behavior during the match was strange. Now he knew why: Cain had apparently decided to have a rather serious conversation with her while they were pummeling each other. He took a deep breath to compose himself before continuing.

“Listen, Maid. A death wish is not a sign of strength. Do not seek to martyr yourself. Your death will appease none but your own vanity.”

A hasty, suicidal approach would accomplish little in the end anyway. From a pragmatic perspective, slow and steady was both the easier and more reliable way to produce actual results.

“But still, he—”

“He’s wrong.”

Like she described, Cain’s self-destructive fixation on becoming stronger had indeed given him a great deal of power. But that didn’t mean he was *right*.

“If he truly wants to eradicate Chaos, he should be making friends. *Lots* of them. True, you couldn’t defeat him alone. But you’re not alone. You have friends — me, Miss Gold, Miss Grim. Look at the bigger picture, and it’s obvious that we’re stronger. He just doesn’t see it because he’s been blinded by his own stubbornness.”

Even in terms of the absolute number of Chaos killed, their combined numbers almost certainly dwarfed his.

“So, Maid,” he said, figuring her pursed-lip silence was a sign that she’d regained her composure, “do you really want to become like him? Do you really think that leaving us and going off to fight all by yourself is the correct path?”

He paused for a second, then softened his tone.

“Maybe you did grow weaker as a result of meeting me, in which case I’m very sorry. But I’m still glad I met you, and I wouldn’t trade the world for it.”

Melia’s lips quivered a little. She bit her lower lip. Then, she drew in a deep breath and slowly let it all out.

“I... am also glad I met you, Master Sain. That much, I know for certain.” She looked up at him. “Thank you. I needed that.”

“No problem. Everyone has an off day sometimes.”

Seeing that she was looking more like her usual self, Sain smiled with relief. The sheer unflappability she displayed on a regular basis made it easy to forget that she wasn't just tagging along with him for fun; she had her reasons for being here. Melia, he reminded himself, wasn't perfect. She was just a girl — a girl who, like him, was only fourteen years old.

"It's all clear to me now," she said. "Cain Theresia is me — if I hadn't met you."

"...So he is."

He nodded at her statement. Based on what she'd described so far, it seemed a fair conclusion.

"In that case, what I need to do is clear to me as well. Clear and quite simple." He looked straight at her and declared, "Tomorrow, I'm going to do for him what I did for you."

A small smile appeared across her lips.

"Are you sure? Unlike me, he's going to be a tough nut to crack."

"...You weren't exactly soft and inviting, either."

A few upsetting memories made him grimace, but nostalgia kept it half-hearted. A sideward glance revealed the approaching figures of Alicia and Marni, and he promptly signaled to them that the battle was over and everyone was safe.

Chapter 4: Friends

The magic battle expo entered its third and final day amidst growing excitement. The semifinals were scheduled to take place in the morning, and the grand finals would occur in the afternoon. In addition, whereas the first two days saw the use of three separate arenas, the final day's matches would all take place on the intermediate division's field.

"Wow, it's *packed* ." said Alicia with a grimace as she approached the stands. "I mean, I expected as much, but still."

The use of only a single arena meant an audience that had been split among three was now merged into one as well. The stands had been expanded to five whole rows of benches overnight, and a large standing area had also been cordoned off to allow for more spectators.

"Anyway. Go out there and do us proud, Sain."

With a bold grin and a hand on her hip, her casual demeanor radiated confidence and trust, which she proceeded to infuse into Sain with an enthusiastic smack on his back. It worked.

"I'll try. Thanks, Miss Gold," he said, feeling better already.

"I'll be rooting for you. Not that you'll hear me in a crowd like this, but yeah."

"Just knowing you're here for me is enough." He turned to Marni.

"Miss Grim— No, *Master* Grim. Rest assured that I won't let you down. I'm going to give it my all."

He'd never have managed to learn so much dark magic without her help. She'd been a blessing to him, and he owed her a great deal. The least he could do right now to repay her was to try his hardest during the upcoming match.

"So... Where's Melia?" asked Alicia, glancing around.

"She had some stuff to take care of, so she won't be here for a while."

"She's missing your match because she had some stuff to take care of? That doesn't sound like her. Is something wrong?"

"No, nothing's wrong. She's fine. Besides, she already gave me her pep talk last night."

Both girls scowled at him.

“...Is it just me, or is one of us trying to get a leg up on the others?”
muttered Alicia.

“...I smell a traitor,” agreed Marni.

Sain frowned, puzzled by their conspiratorial tone.

“Uh, anyway, I’m off. Wish me luck.”

He closed his eyes, opened them, and walked off toward the ring with renewed focus.



After finishing up his work in the student council office, Cain Theresia began preparing for his match. He picked up the sword leaning against the wall and inspected the blade. After confirming there were no signs of damage, he moved on to the rest of his equipment. Finally, he hung the sword on his waist, pushed open the door, and left the room.

“Cain.”

As the door swung closed, Emilia appeared behind it. She’d been waiting for him outside.

“I, um... I’ll be cheering for you.”

“Sure.”

He uttered a single syllable of acknowledgment and walked off toward the arena. As he did, Emilia caught a glimpse of what could only be a gash on his left arm. The words left her before she could stop herself.

“Last night! What were you doing last ni—”

“Emilia.” He cut her off with a voice that chilled her to the bone.

“Don’t ask about things you don’t need to know.”

Faced with his withering glare, she felt all her questions slink back down her throat. In the crushing silence, he turned away from her and resumed his stride, eventually disappearing down a flight of stairs.

Halfway down the hall that led outside, Cain found his path blocked by a girl in a maid uniform.

“Hm. The failed avenger. What do you want?”

His provocation had little effect on her.

“There’s something that I suspect you misunderstood, so I’m here to clear it up for you.” She looked him straight in the eye. “You are indeed stronger than me. That much is certain. While I lived my life in peace, you devoted yourself to honing your skills in a single-minded pursuit of power. That kind of dedication is definitely praiseworthy. You should be proud of yourself,” she said with genuine respect before her tone hardened. “But... I’m equally proud of who I’ve become. And I’d like you to acknowledge as much. That’s all.”

Having said what she’d come here to say, she lowered her head and stepped aside, opening the way.

“...What rubbish,” he spat as he walked past her toward the arena.

Nebulous concepts such as pride were not to his liking. It had no bearing on the actual outcome. All the pride in the world couldn’t change the cold, hard truth of reality.

“Our contestants for the first match of the semifinals are Cain Theresia and Sain Fostess!”

The commentator announced his arrival as he stepped out into the ring amidst the thunderous roar of an audience many times larger than before. Both students and outside guests were packed into the stands and standing areas, their faces filled with excitement. Up ahead, in the middle of the ring, Sain stood waiting in his signature black garb.

“With the battle expo in its third day, we’re finally into the semifinals! First up, we have the lightkind Cain versus the darkkind Sain! So far, both contestants have displayed...”

The voice of a female commentator echoed throughout the arena, working the crowd and fueling their enthusiasm by offering details of each contestant. The commotion, however, seemed to fade away as he locked eyes with Sain.

“Cain, before the match starts, I want to make a deal with you.” Treating his silence as a cue to continue, Sain declared, “If I win, you join me as a friend.”

“...What?”

Despite his usual imperturbable composure, his eyes widened in a rare expression of surprise. The request was so outlandish that even he didn’t see it coming. Nevertheless, disdain soon returned to his gaze.

“...Are you telling me to become an attendant? Of the holy knight?”

“That’s exactly what I’m telling you.”

They stared at each other for a while. Then, Cain burst into a bout of scornful laughter.

“Ha... Ha ha ha ha! Join you? As a *friend*?”

The thought was so ridiculous that it was comical. As his sardonic amusement waned, it gave way to a murderous aura so intense it could make the more timid among the spectators faint on the spot.

“Such nerve... Do you really think I would agree to that?”

Cain Theresia had lost his younger sister to a blunder on the part of Sain’s predecessor. With his hatred for the holy knight still burning strong, the last thing he was going to do was befriend the one who held the title. His reaction was no surprise, and Sain had of course seen it coming.

“I won’t use the power of the holy knight.”

“...What?”

“I know that acceptance of the holy knight is beyond you. That’s why I’m going to fight you as a normal person striving to become the dark knight. For this match, your opponent is not the holy knight, but me, Sain Fostess.”

Cain’s brows furrowed at the proposal. Then, Sain made his final statement.

“If you refuse to be a friend to the holy knight, then be a friend to *me!* Plain old me!”

That got a reaction from Cain, whose eyes widened just as a translucent screen was projected over the field between them.

“Let’s start the countdown!”

As the number in the middle of the screen slowly ticked toward zero, he scoffed quietly at the thought.

“Rubbish... All rubbish.”

He glowered at Sain.

“You have no chance against me without the power of the holy knight.”

Menace erupted from him, so thick it was almost tangible. Sain braced himself as well, tightening his fists as the wave of psychological force slammed into him. Tension of an intensity entirely unsuited for a competition between students filled the air.

“Let the match begin!”

As the commentator’s reverberating voice signaled the start of the match, both of them thrust out their right arm in unison.

“*Darku!* ”

“*Ligho.* ”

Sain launched his spell with a defiant roar. In comparison, Cain was practically a statue. The two diametrically opposed projectiles collided in the middle of the ring, pushing against one another for just a second before the glowing bullet of light ripped through its counterpart and shot straight toward Sain.

“Gah!”

He dodged the oncoming threat and quickly tried to counter, only for Cain to appear within a few inches of his face, sword raised high overhead. His hand shot to his own sword, drawing it just in time to wedge it horizontally against the coming blow. The two blades met with a loud clang before he promptly angled his own, allowing Cain’s to slide off.

“*Darku!* ”

The successful parry freed up his other hand, and he immediately used it to throw out a projectile. Cain jerked himself out of its path and evaded it, his motion optimally minimal, before sending a kick into Sain's gut.

"Oomph!"

Sain stumbled back a few steps, groaning as the air left his lungs. He forced himself to fight through it; whatever happened, he couldn't afford to lose sight of Cain. Before he managed to even draw another breath, he already had his sword up in a defensive stance.

Cain watched him with a questioning look.

"Why do you seek to befriend me?"

"Because you..." said Sain as he wiped some sand from his face. "Are trying to kill yourself."

He took a moment to catch his breath before continuing.

"Let me make this very clear. The only reason you've survived until now... is because you were lucky. Keep this up, and it'll cost you. *Dearly*. One day, you'll trip up, and you're going to die for it. Why am I trying to befriend you, you ask? Because you need friends. Without them, there's no one to save you from your own self-destructive tendencies."

His assertion earned him a narrow-eyed glare from Cain.

"A baseless claim... How can you possibly know?"

"I know because my maid was the same," replied Sain with absolute certainty. "I already heard from your vice-president. You took a serious beating on the last day of the field exercises, didn't you? I assume it's starting to sink in, but in case you really are that dense, let me spell it out for you. Chaos is not an enemy you can handle alone."

Put in words, the statement was so obvious that it seemed redundant. If Chaos was the kind of thing an ordinary person could easily fight off, its existence would hardly need to be a closely-guarded secret, and the unique powers of the holy knight and dark knight would never have been conferred. Deep down, Cain probably understood this. Against the colossal threat of Chaos, there was a limit to what one person could do on their own. They were creatures so dangerous that the two gods had kept them sealed away since ancient times. A single human could do little in the face of such a foe.

Sain knew all this, and that was why he was concerned. To him, Cain was a person teetering on the brink of self-destruction. Just like how Melia had been when they first met, it was likely that Cain's actions were not

grounded in reason. It was hatred that drove him, and he'd stop at nothing to satisfy his desire for revenge, even if it cost him his life. Considering he'd lived like this since he was a child and continued to do so, it was an absolute miracle that he was still alive. It was, of course, also the source of his strength. Having miraculously survived scenario after deadly scenario, he had experience and grit on a level incomparable to his peers.

He was strong, make no mistake. But it was a perverse strength, cursed to endanger those around him.

"All right... I see what you're trying to say, holy knight," he said, blond hair bristling as he strained to hold his anger at bay, "and it is profoundly infuriating. Your assumptions and arguments are all predicated on one thing — that you are stronger than me."

It was, Sain realized, a fair point. He wasn't trying to preach, but it probably came across that way. As someone who'd fought Chaos by himself on countless occasions and lived to tell the tale, Cain had a right to an ego. Empty warnings of future defeat weren't going to shake his beliefs. In fact, his absolute confidence in himself was probably the very reason he was still alive.

"You said you won't use the power of the holy knight. Very well. I'll force you to," Cain said as he sheathed his sword. "I'm going to make you use that power, and defeat you when you do so."

A massive amount of light magical energy began gathering in front of him. Seeing that he was shifting to a magic-based approach, Sain sheathed his sword as well and began running.

"Great torrent of light, blind the land with an argent sea — Velle Vright."

A river of pure light rushed toward Sain, bathing the whole arena in its golden glow. Being light magic, however, he was intimately familiar with the spell and could predict its movement with his eyes closed. *Velle Vright* had a large area of effect, but it could be evaded by leaping over it. He fought down the fear of facing down a massive flood of light and jumped as high as he could. As he left the ground, Cain calmly pointed his palm toward him.

"Vright."

"Dardia!"

Sain had his spell ready to go before he'd even jumped, and the two of them launched their orbs almost simultaneously. Unlike the first clash

between *Darku* and *Lighto* , this time, the two spells proved equal in power and canceled each other out.

“Lighto Shot. ”

Not missing a beat, Cain followed up with a flurry of light pellets. Sain responded in kind.

“Darku Shot! ”

Flurry met flurry, and a noise like the pitter-patter of rain except amplified many times in volume ensued. The burst kicked up a cloud of dust.

Cain tsked in annoyance as Sain landed on his feet, stumbling a step but quickly regaining his balance.

“Shooting down that entire barrage, huh... I see you have some knowledge. Like attendant, like master... though I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised, *holy knight* ,” Cain muttered. “A dark mage who knows more about light magic than anyone else, huh... I hate to admit it, but you might actually be a light mage’s worst nightmare.”

“Hah, did it only occur to you just now?”

Sain showed him a bold grin. As the holy knight, his understanding of light magic was unparalleled in the world, as knowledge of all light magic had already been conferred upon him. He knew how to use every spell and therefore also how to counter every spell. Melia had taken advantage of this knowledge during the third round, but Sain also had access to its polar opposite — dark magic. As a fivekind, Melia had no way of defending herself against Cain’s spells; she could only avoid them. With dark magic, however, Sain had the choice to stand his ground and neutralize the approaching threat.

When it came to battles involving magic, some forms had inherent advantages over others. In this case, Sain didn’t have Melia’s fundamentals, but his magical arsenal was uniquely effective against Cain’s. He was, in fact, probably the one person in this entire tournament who was perfectly positioned to counter all of Cain’s magic.

“Now that I think about it, you’ve done nothing but get in my way,” said Cain. “Three months ago in the Origin Spire... You were the one who killed the Chaos hiding in that labyrinth, weren’t you?”

“And if I am? What’s your point?” answered Sain in a cautious tone.

“I was letting it hide there on purpose,” Cain said, proceeding to explain his intent. “The Clan of Chaos had been trying to get their hands on

the titan's staff before you even came to this school. That corrupted demi-holy sword was part of their groundwork to break in. When the time came, they were planning to release all the Chaos they'd hidden in the labyrinth and use them as a diversion. While the school staff was busy rushing into the labyrinth to deal with the confusion, they'd use the opportunity to steal the titan's staff."

"And knowing all this, you chose to let them be?"

"That's right. I was going to use their scheme against them. Let them all in and wipe them out then and there. But thanks to your meddling... that won't be happening anymore."

The sheer recklessness of the plan left Sain speechless. Failure would have placed the lives of countless innocents at risk.

"And that's not all," Cain continued. "Because you strengthened the academy's barrier, they've ceased operations. Originally, they were supposed to mount their offensive around this time, but your actions have made it impossible to predict their timing. Everything you've done up to this point... has been a disservice to me."

Cain rattled off complaint after complaint in an almost business-like manner, but the implications of what he was saying were profoundly distressing. The more Sain heard, the more furious he felt.

"Are you out of your mind?!" he exclaimed, shaking with anger. "These things aren't pushovers! You can't just wipe them out all by yourself!"

"...And who are you to judge, you pretentious clown?" Cain snarled back, his intensity matching Sain's volume. "Don't project your own weakness onto me, holy knight! I'm not like you!"

He raised his hand toward the sky, bringing a massive spear of light into existence.

"Ray Javelin!"

Sain looked up at the glowing spear, its tip pointed diagonally downwards at him. He knew this spell as well. *Ray Javelin* would explode upon contact. Dodging the spear itself wasn't enough.

"Darku!"

He didn't have time to prepare a big spell. As the enormous spear bore down on him, he shot a bullet of darkness at its tip. Once he confirmed that it hit hard enough to slightly alter the spear's trajectory, he started running, trying to gain as much distance as possible. As soon as the spell hit the ground, it exploded violently.

“Ugh!”

A blinding flash lit up the whole arena, forcing his eyes shut. He crossed his arms in front him, bracing for the impending impact. The shockwave hit and sent him tumbling backward through the air. He felt his body bounce off the ground multiple times before slowing into a long roll. The world was spinning when he forced himself to his feet, but through the aches, dizziness, and thick cloud of dust obscuring his vision, he somehow managed to lock eyes with Cain.

“You asked me to join you as a friend.”

“...That’s right.”

“Why do you not see the inherent danger in this kind of thinking?” Cain’s gaze was reproachful. “The holy knight, who is one of the strongest beings in existence, shouldn’t need friends. The only reason you would still seek to make friends through the attendant pacts, then, is your own weakness of will. Having friends might sound good in theory... but the more you make, the more vulnerable you become through your reliance on them.”

He was, Sain figured, probably talking about Alicia, Melia, and Marni, whose existence he saw as a crutch and source of weakness. According to him, by relying on the girls, Sain was becoming less self-sufficient.

“Are you saying I should always fight alone?”

“That’s right. In the end, nothing gets solved until you’re strong enough to do it yourself.”

Sain recalled how Cain had always given off an aura of unapproachability. As it turned out, the aloofness wasn’t an inadvertent side effect of his disposition; it was intentional. No one ever stood at his side. Even yesterday, when he’d gone to fight the Chaos that appeared near the school, he’d done so alone. The way he insisted on distancing himself from others, on being alone... it felt almost like an obsession, and Sain knew exactly where it was coming from.

“...This is about regret, isn’t it?” His tone grew more sympathetic. “I owe you an apology. Yesterday, I asked the goddess to show me the memories of the previous holy knight.”

He’d done so after killing off all the Chaos with the girls. In order to figure out how to convince Cain the next day, he’d used the goddess’s power to find out more about his past. Cain’s younger sister had apparently died as a result of the previous holy knight’s blunder. In that case, he should

have been able to learn the details from the goddess, who had doubtlessly been present during the incident. She'd agreed, and when she showed him the memories of the previous holy knight, he finally witnessed the tragic scene for himself.

"Ten years ago... your sister died protecting you."

Cain's expression darkened immediately, but the menace eventually gave way to grief.

"She did..." he admitted, his voice hoarse with regret. "It should have been me. I should have been the one to die."

And then, there in the middle of the arena, the student council president — a creature of pride and confidence who had always held his head high and his eyes forward — lowered his gaze and spoke into the ground in front of him.

"It appeared without any warning. A Founder of Chaos, right there in front of us. Fear held me so tightly that I couldn't even move a finger... So she moved instead. My little sister... She jumped in front of me. She shielded me. And I watched as she died being ripped apart limb from limb."

There was a moment of silence, during which Sain could hear Cain's teeth grinding against each other. Then, he continued.

"That's why I sought strength. Relentlessly and desperately. My little sister died because I was weak. If I was stronger... If only I had been stronger, she wouldn't have died protecting me."

Finally, the core of Cain's being was laid bare. His fixation on strength and obsession on self-reliance all originated from this one terrible incident. He couldn't rely on anyone else. He had to be stronger than everyone else. Those were the thoughts that drove him day after day. They were a blessing and a curse, simultaneously conferring upon him a hardened resolve and a twisted compulsion. The kinds of mayhem he'd thrown himself into over the years and the carnage he'd witnessed were probably beyond all imagination. He endured them all for one singular goal — to make himself stronger. The way he lived was a thing of awe, but it was also supremely dangerous; he constantly walked on a razor's edge, on which either side was the oblivion of self-destruction.

"And why don't *you* see that what you're doing will only lead to the same tragedy happening again?"

"...What are you talking about?"

Sain bared his teeth in a frustrated grimace. Cain's fixation on strength was so absolute that it was blinding him to the dangers it posed.

"Tell me something, Cain. When was the last time you lost to anyone?"

The question caught Cain off guard, and he frowned.

"I don't remember. Whenever it was, it must have been before I became a student."

"...In other words, ever since your sister died, you've basically never lost to anyone."

"Of course. That's why I got stronger. So I wouldn't lose."

That meant for an entire decade, Cain had never tasted defeat. It suddenly occurred to Sain that this was no small revelation. Something was keeping Cain chained to his misguided path, and this was surely a crucial piece of the puzzle. Slowly but surely, Sain was getting closer to solving it.

"That must be why there's always a glaring hole in the way you think. You never lose, so you never think about what would happen if you did," Sain said, working through the logic on the fly while Cain continued to frown at him. "I've only been here three months, and even I can tell that you're not actually alone. Tons of people look up to you. If you ever suffered defeat, you would not do so in quiet solitude. There would be an uproar."

The student council president, Cain Theresia, was no lone wolf. He was infamously unfriendly and difficult to approach, but to his fellow students, his standoffishness often came off as a form of charisma rather than hostility. They respected him as a dependable student council president. The teachers held him in high regard, as well. Even the audience in this arena was looking forward to his performance. Despite his obsession with fighting his lonely fight, he wasn't at all alone. Sooner or later, that inherent contradiction would come to a head, with serious consequences for everyone involved.

"Just try imagining it. Picture yourself in a situation where you do lose. Isn't there someone who might jump in? Someone who might place themselves in harm's way to protect you?"

If a fight with Chaos ever pushed Cain to the limit and he was on the verge of defeat, there was very likely someone who wouldn't think twice about sacrificing themselves to save him, just like his younger sister did so long ago.

“...I told you already. That’s why I got stronger. So that would never happen to me.”

Irritation entered Cain’s voice — a sure sign that the strongman act was starting to crack.

“It happens to everyone,” Sain said, his tone calm but absolute. “I get you, Cain. I really do. The more strength a person gains, the stronger the urge becomes to solve everything on their own. There is a tendency to try to bear the burden of strength alone. But the strength of a single man is a fragile thing, Cain... All it takes is one mistake, one moment of carelessness, for everything to fall apart.”

Sain’s words bore the weight of personal experience. There had been a time when he thought the same way. Before he’d started harboring doubts about his way of life as the holy knight, he’d tried to solve every problem by himself. Then, when he’d discovered that none of what he did could ever grant the goddess her wish, he finally realized that there existed problems which could not be solved by his power alone. That was why he enrolled in this academy hoping to find out more about dark magic, and it was also why he enthusiastically sought out a superior dark mage like Marni to learn from.

Only when he began to question himself did he realize that his path wasn’t heading in the right direction. In order to notice his error, he had to first accept that he could err. By the same logic, someone would have to first shatter the absolute confidence Cain had in himself before there was any chance of making him see the error of his ways.

“You know what you need to do, Cain? *Lose* . Just once. Then, you’d realize that you’re not fighting on your own.”

What Cain Theresia needed was to have his blind faith in himself thoroughly shaken for once. Unless he suffered a defeat significant enough to prompt some honest reflection, his iron will would keep him marching blindly forward toward his inevitable undoing.

“Says the holy knight who fancies becoming the dark knight. You dare lecture me,” Cain growled as irritation turned into honest anger, “while you’re shirking your duties to fool around with dark magic—”

“I’m not fooling around!” Sain matched Cain’s temper, shouting back at the enraged president. “I have my reasons for trying to get stronger, too!”

“To hell with your stupid reasons!”

Cain thrust his right hand up at the sky.

“Flash like serpent’s fangs — Lighto Whip! ”

A long strand of light appeared around his arm, and he swung it down at Sain’s head, who hopped out of the way just in time before quickly backing off to observe Cain’s next move. The whip kept coming, its long strand of light bending unpredictably through the air as it lashed out at him from all sorts of directions. The irregular motion of its rope-like structure would have thoroughly confused any ordinary student, robbing them of the ability to evade its strikes. Sain’s unparalleled familiarity with light magic, however, kept him from losing his cool.

“Dardia! ”

Reading the whip’s movements with expert precision, he launched the dark orb at where he thought it would come from next. A split second later, his prediction was proven correct; the orb was placed so perfectly that the whip seemed to be pulled toward it. As the golden strand curved around its shadowy locus, *Dardia* shaved through its middle, and the severed front dissolved with a flash.

Cain was undeterred and continued to press the attack, launching a barrage of light pellets at Sain.

“Use it, holy knight!” he roared. “Use your power! And I’ll show you I can beat it!”

Sain intercepted the attack with his own volley of *Darku Shot* and yelled back.

“I’m not the holy knight! I’m...”

He drew in a deep breath. Right now, at least, the one who stood opposite Cain in the ring was—

“Just Sain! Nothing more, nothing less!”

A salvo of dark missiles accompanied his fiery response. Cain leapt out of the way, lifting his arm above his head in the process.

“Ray Javelin! ”

A massive, ethereal spear flared into existence, bathing the arena in its golden light as it plunged toward Sain.

“Dark Ray! ”

There was a flash, and a dark lance slammed into the oncoming spear, bored through its head, and shot out of its rear like a bolt of black lightning.

“Wha—?!”

The dark lance pierced Cain’s shoulder, marking the first time he’d been wounded in the entire tournament.

“I’m trying to become the dark knight because I want to save the goddess from her loneliness.”

“...The goddess?”

Cain froze for a second. Then, a laugh, equal parts amazed and contemptuous, escaped him.

“The holy knight’s duty is to exterminate the Chaos that escaped the gods’ seals. Are you telling me you’re placing your own desire above your sacred obligation?”

“That... I can’t deny it.” A grimace flashed across Sain’s face for the briefest moment. “But this is something that no holy knight has ever been able to accomplish. It’s a problem that every single one of my predecessors kept putting off.”

The previous holy knight, and the one before, and all the ones throughout history... They’d surely noticed how lonely the goddess was, but every one of them, without fail, chose their duty over her feelings and spent all their time hunting Chaos as they continued to kick the can down the road. Sain didn’t fault them for it; perhaps it was how things were meant to be. But by what was perhaps some cosmic coincidence, the title was passed to Sain who, unlike all his forerunners, just so happened to think that this problem shouldn’t be put off any longer. From that thought grew a desire that had been absent in every holy knight until now.

“This chain of negligence needs to end... and I’m determined to end it. One way or another.”

There was a resolve to the words that caught Cain off guard. For a long moment, he regarded Sain with surprise. Then, he quietly closed his eyes as the aura of rage about him dissipated.

“...I will admit, Sain Fostess,” he said, his gaze free of ire but still combative, “that you are not the holy knight I know. Everything about you, from your goals to your disposition, is different. Whatever hatred I feel, you do not seem to be deserving of it.”

At last, Cain acknowledged his opponent as just another ordinary person — a person named Sain.

“Sword of salvation, hear my pledge to bear the sacred light, guide all that is just and right— ”

Luminous particles started gathering in Cain’s hand.

“Saint Saber. ”

As more and more of them converged, they began to take on an elongated form until a sword of pure, concentrated light glowed in his grip. Its radiance closely resembled that of the holy sword — a symbol of the holy knight — and the similarities likely did not end there; the sword probably conferred a great deal of power upon the wielder. It was a distillation of Cain's strength.

The glowing blade was a statement. Cain would now fight at full strength, not because of his hatred for the holy knight, but in honest competition against Sain himself.

"Let's do this, Sain Fostess."

He brandished his sword.

"...Bring it."

Likewise, Sain readied his coup de grâce, *Dark Ray*, to be unleashed at a moment's notice. Both of them were reaching the limits of their stamina. This last clash would decide it all. They each swept their gazes across the ring. The instant their eyes crossed, their forms blurred into motion simultaneously. Cain charged at Sain, light sword in hand. It shone with such intense luster that a steel wall would probably part like butter to its edge. Sain could scarcely hope to defend against it unarmed, but the sword at his waist offered little solace. He still had his dark magic, and in particular, the decisive *Dark Ray* he'd learnt from Marni, but both fatigue and circumstance suggested he had only one last shot.

So, he stood his ground, forcing himself to watch, to wait, to strike at the most vulnerable opening that would appear at the last second.

Cain was mere steps away — Not yet.

Cain raised his light sword over his head — Still not yet.

Cain swung.

Now!

"*Dark Ray!*"

As the glowing blade drew a lethal arc toward his head, he let his dark missile go. Had he been a fraction of a second late, he'd have been parted down the middle. The ensuing shower of bicolored sparks, however, told him he hadn't misjudged his timing. Light sword collided with black lance, pushing against one another with violent energy.

All throughout the match, and even for a long time before it, he'd been contemplating a single question. How could he make Cain Theresia

acknowledge his strength? Not the strength of Sain the holy knight, but the strength of Sain Fostess, the person?

The solution was similarly singular; he had to win. Leaving him with a few scratches wouldn't do. Even a draw was unlikely to suffice. A clear victory was needed. He would have to face the full power of Cain head-on, and best him in resounding fashion.

This was his first chance to do so. It would also be his last.

“Gooooooooo!”

Dark Ray, with its incredible speed and penetrative power, slammed into the sword. A crack appeared on the glowing blade. Then, there was a deafening explosion.

“That was a massive explosion! It swallowed both of them!”

The commentator's astonished exclamation echoed in the arena as the blast kicked up a thick cloud of dust. The crowd burst into commotion. The last thing they saw was Sain's lance grinding against Cain's sword. After the dust cleared, the outcome became clear.

“Th-There's one person standing. It's... It's Cain!”

He was standing in a completely different place than when the blast had occurred; the shockwave had presumably sent him reeling. His uniform was badly torn, and he was panting heavily.

“And lying flat on the ground over there is Sain! Which means... the winner of this match is Cain Theresia!”

The substitute pendant Sain was wearing had been shattered. The result was clear. As announced by the commentator, Cain was the victor. The audience erupted in deafening cheers, their excitement reaching a fever pitch. Almost every single one of them had come expecting to see Cain make short work of his unfortunate opponent. What they were treated to was a nail-biter of a match that came down to the wire. As a spectacle, it was unexpectedly riveting and deeply satisfying to behold.

“I've never seen Cain have so much trouble in a match, but in the end, he still managed to clinch it! With this victory, he has secured himself a spot in the grand finals!”

“No.” Cain spoke in a level voice as he contradicted the commentators. “This match left me completely exhausted. Recovering in time for the next one is impossible... I'm dropping out.”

Only after a long period of stunned silence was his decision acknowledged by the tournament staff.

Sain woke up to the ceiling of the school infirmary. The sight alone was enough for him to understand what had happened. He sat up on his bed and looked at the clock. Only an hour had passed since the beginning of the semifinals.

“So, in the end, I guess I still lost.”

“It was close.”

Only then did he realize he wasn't alone in the room. He turned to find Alicia sitting nearby.

“Well, I mean, I guess it depends on how hard he was trying, so I can't say for sure,” she amended.

“Yeah...”

Alicia was right. Had Cain really been fighting at full power during that match? The deep grudge he harbored against the holy knight imparted an emotional significance to the match that had clearly affected his mental state. Furthermore, he'd just done another one of his one-man-army stunts against a horde of Chaos the previous day, which must have left him weary and battered. It seemed unlikely that a single night was enough for him to make a full recovery.

“...I think he did give it everything he's got for that last spell, though,” mused Marni.

“It sure did seem like it,” agreed Melia. “That holy sword thing looked like it packed some serious punch.”

Sain nodded and let out a breathy “Yeah” as the door to the room opened.

“Excuse me. Coming in,” said Cain as he walked in and looked directly at Sain. “I see you're awake. And appear to be fine.”

“Yeah, I guess...” he said before remembering how their match had ended. “What about you? Are you okay?”

Their spells had caused one hell of an explosion.

“Far from it. I didn't pass out, but I sure feel like I'm about to any second. I won't be swinging any more swords today.”

He wasn't kidding; exhaustion was written clearly on his face. That, however, begged the question of why he'd drag his exhausted self all the

way here to see Sain. The answer came in the form of him approaching Melia.

“Sorry.”

Sain watched with a puzzled frown as the student council president lowered his head.

“In an attempt to justify what I’ve become, I disregarded your way of life,” said Cain. “It was reprehensible of me to do so, and I take back everything I said.”

Her brows rose briefly in surprise, but she quickly accepted his apology.

“...It’s fine. I got a little too worked up too.”

Next, he turned to Alicia.

“Alicia Remia.”

“Y-Yes? What?”

“I believe I’ve spoken some hurtful words to you as well.”

He was probably talking about the time when they’d run into him in the Origin Spire three months ago.

“I disparaged your inability to use light magic, going so far as to call you a disgrace to the clan, only for you to reappear before me as a proud attendant of the holy knight. In dismissing your efforts as the futile pursuit of a dream beyond your reach, I have merely proven myself to have no eye for talent. For that, I apologize.”

“O-Okay already. That was three months ago, geez... And could you please stop it with all the apologizing? It’s creeping me out. Just be your usual cocky self, okay?” said Alicia as she fiddled uncomfortably with her hair.

Her response drew a smile from him and a soft whisper of “I see.” The truth was that neither Sain nor any of the girls actually felt much lasting anger at Cain. Were he a fundamentally bad person, they would have found it much harder to forgive him, but he was honest and straightforward almost to a fault. In addition, any friction they’d experienced between them was arguably a consequence of his past, which was tragic enough to warrant some understanding on their part.

“Sain, you said that you’re going to save the goddess from her own loneliness. How exactly do you intend to do that?” asked Cain, continuing a topic that had been left unfinished during the match.

“By becoming a god.”

“...Becoming a god?”

“That’s right. After becoming the dark knight, I intend to eventually succeed Shartegallia. The goddess wants to live the same lifetime as someone else. The only way for me to grant her wish is to become her equal.”

After a short pause, Cain broke out in a fit of laughter.

“Haha... Hahahaha! Seriously? Your goal... is to *become a god* ?”

His amusement persisted, but there was nothing derisive in his chortle. Rather, it came from honest astonishment, and there was a warmth to it that both lightened the mood in the room and shattered the image of the wintry president.

Alicia let out a breath that she seemed to have been holding onto for a long time.

“Geez, and here I was worried you’d be at each other’s throats again...” she muttered. “What happened to the whole I-hate-the-holy-knight-with-a-burning-hatred thing?”

“...I still do,” he answered, though his tone sounded lighter than usual. “But I’ve come to the realization that directing said hatred at our resident nutcase is both misguided and an exercise in futility.”

“Resident nutcase?!” exclaimed Sain in indignation.

“Am I wrong? You are the holy knight, yet you aspire to be the dark knight... and even that is a mere stepping stone for your ultimate goal of *literal godhood* . What part of that sounds sane to you, hm?” Despite openly questioning Sain’s sanity, there was a sense of approval to Cain’s voice. “As the holy knight, you are egregiously irresponsible. As a person, though, I find you reasonably likeable.” Then, he gave Sain a sober look. “I still stand by everything I’ve done. I have no intention of apologizing for who I am. But... I’ll admit that I’ve been overconfident. I certainly didn’t expect you to make it such a close match.”

Compared to before they had their match, his attitude had softened considerably. It seemed like he still harbored some reservations toward the holy knight, but it was more than enough progress for now.

“So, about what I said to you right before the match...” said Sain, bringing the topic back to his original goal of convincing Cain to make some friends — the kind he trusted with his life. “Seeing as we’re both trying to defeat Chaos, our goals should be aligned. As the one who lost the match, I’m not in any position to be making demands, but...”

Cain frowned at his proposition, though the expression seemed more contemplative than averse.

“...Let me think about it,” he said in a solemn tone.

He fell silent, and a placid atmosphere descended on the room.

It didn't last. The stillness was broken by a thunderous rumble outside that shook the ground, causing the medicine cabinets in the infirmary to rattle loudly.

“What the—”

“—*Hell* was that?”

Sain and Cain remarked in unison.

“*Sain!*”

The goddess appeared beside Sain, though he was the only one who could see her.

“G-Goddess? What are you doing here? I thought I told you not to show up unless I—”

“*Forget that! We have a problem!*” she exclaimed in an urgent voice audible only to him. “*Chaos is here! And they're really close!*”

“What?!”

He hastily focused and extended his senses outward. It didn't take long to find their presence, approaching from afar. There was still some distance between the Chaos and them, so he didn't notice until the goddess pointed it out.

“Melia! Alicia!” He promptly spoke their names and transferred his power of the holy knight into them. “Chaos is coming! We have to deal with them as soon as possible! Let's go!”

“D-Deal with them? How? There are still tons of people here!”

He bit his lip. She was right. They couldn't start duking it out with a bunch of Chaos while everyone was watching. In response, Melia raised her hand.

“What about the barrier?” she asked. “People should be safe as long as they stay inside the school grounds, right?”

It was a good point. The academy was protected by a gigantic barrier that drew upon the power of the titan's staff. However, this idea was immediately refuted by the goddess.

“*I'm sorry, Sain... but that barrier probably won't be enough.*” Her voice, soft and apologetic, trembled as she spoke. “*A Founder is coming.*”

“A... Founder?”

"I'm sure of it. This presence can't be anything else..."

"B-But... Weren't all the Founders sealed away?"

"Remember the Clan of Chaos you fought last time? This is probably their doing. Especially since they'd already figured out how to extract power from the Founders."

Harti, Marni's older sister, had inherited the power extracted from a Founder, making her a second generation Chaos whose strength was inferior only to the Founders themselves.

"The seals weren't designed to inhibit human tampering because no humans had ever sided with Chaos. Now that they have, the sealing mechanism will probably need to be reworked. Still, I never thought something like this would be possible..."

"...No point crying over spilt milk. How long will the barrier last against them?"

"Maybe five minutes."

The gravity of the situation solidified his resolve.

"All right, everyone. Listen up. There's a Founder of Chaos loose, and it's coming for us."

Everyone's eyes went wide and he was met with astonished silence. He'd spoken to the girls before on multiple occasions about how dangerous the Founders were, so they grasped the severity of their situation immediately. Cain, for his part, required no explanation; he had first-hand experience with the havoc they could wreak. As a result, there was no panic. Everyone understood the importance of acting quickly and in an orderly fashion. It brought a smile to Sain's lips. These were the kind of friends he could count on.

"Apparently, the barrier will only last about five minutes. That means we've got five minutes to evacuate everyone in the school. Alicia, Melia, I'm leaving this to you two."

"Got it."

"Will do."

The two girls nodded.

"The enemy is probably after the titan's staff being used to maintain the academy's barrier. Miss Grim, I need you to wait in the room with the staff. The Clan of Chaos is probably wary of me and Cain, so you might catch them off guard by hitting them with dark magic."

"...Understood."

“Don’t get too caught up in trying to beat them though. Your ambush is meant to buy time, not do damage. Gauge their strength carefully and avoid any serious combat.”

Marni nodded as well.

“This has to be the worst time for them to show up,” muttered Alicia.

“That’s probably the point. I suspect the enemy has been waiting for this very moment, when our student council president is exhausted from the battle expo and there are tons of civilians everywhere to make it harder for us to fight,” Sain explained as he removed the seals he wore and allowed the full power of the holy knight to course through him.

Despite the previous match leaving him in arguably even worse condition than Cain, the goddess’s power functioned as a substitute reservoir of stamina, giving him the strength to fight again.

“Cain, can you get out of here by yourself?”

“Yes. I... will go and help out with the evacuation. I might be useless in a fight right now, but I can at least hobble around and bark orders.”

“Heh. That’ll be plenty useful.”

The old Cain would almost certainly have insisted on fighting the approaching Chaos regardless of how ill-advised it would be. Like the old Melia, he would have been a victim of his lone avenger obsession. His willingness to take a backseat to the action made it clear that he had changed, and likely for the better. Sain allowed himself a brief smile before sobering his expression.

“All right, everyone. Keep to the plan and man your stations. In the meantime, I’m going to take down as many Chaos as I can.”

Alicia and Melia made a beeline for the main school building while Sain and Marni headed out to the school grounds, after which they split up and Marni made her way toward the room with the titan’s staff. Sain, now alone, drew his sword and stepped outside the main gate of the school.

After Sain and his friends left, Cain took charge of the evacuation.

“We’re under assault by dangerous monsters! Start heading to the shelter immediately!”

This was where the sheer scope of the academy came into play. Jenifa was an enormous institution that owned large tracts of land in remote locations, an example of which was the forest used for the field exercises. One of these locations was home to an evacuation shelter, which was exactly what they needed at the moment.

“If you’re a student, help with evacuating the outside guests and guide them toward the shelter!”

He checked for the presence of Chaos nearby and found that they were not surrounding the school. Instead, the attack was concentrated in a single direction. If they had wanted to take hostages, encircling the academy would have been more effective, but that probably would have forced them to spread out their forces too much, making it impossible to breach the barrier. While Sain was keeping them busy, he had to evacuate as many people as possible.

“Ugh...”

A sudden bout of dizziness forced him to stop and catch his breath. His whole body was steeped in fatigue. His limbs felt like lead, and every step was an effort.

“The power of the holy knight, huh... It sure would be convenient to have that right now,” he muttered, recalling the way Sain had instantly revitalized himself and ran off to fight. He figured it involved taking the goddess’s power into himself and using it to temporarily restore his stamina.

Ever since his sister had been killed by Chaos, he’d studied light magic tirelessly. Furthermore, he’d done considerable research into the holy knight, granting him an accurate understanding of their abilities and strengths. If he had had that power... could he have saved his sister?

“I...”

He’d never felt the urge to pine — to wish he had something he didn’t. Strength alone was his guide, and he’d thought that having more of it would always be the solution to all his problems. Now, however, that power was within reach. It was a power he would never have been able to acquire, and right now, it could be his. All he had to do was ask.

He didn’t want to reject everything about his past self. He’d been overconfident, yes, but he had gained genuine strength as a result. The path he’d taken wasn’t a mistake, and he hadn’t walked it lightly. A new power was now at his fingertips. He had no doubt that Sain would readily give it to him. No matter how hard he tried, though, he couldn’t turn his mind away from the memory of his sister dying at the hands of Chaos. If he’d had the power of the holy knight then, would his sister have been saved? No, she wouldn’t have. The holy knight had been present, and his sister had still died.

What did that mean? It meant not all forms of strength were equal, and he had to make sure he was pursuing the right one. The thought was troubling, sending tendrils of doubt into the deepest parts of his mind. Just then, he heard the sound of glass cracking overhead.

“What’s— The barrier! It broke!”

Normally transparent and invisible to the human eye, the barrier became briefly observable as it crumbled. Soon after, a unique presence wafted in, so vile that it elicited visceral disgust; it was the undeniable sensation of Chaos.

“Kyaaaa!”

Somewhere, a girl screamed, signaling the entry of Chaos into the school grounds. He looked around and discovered that Alicia and Melia were already in the thick of battle.

“Ray Javelin!”

He launched his massive spear of light at a Beast of Chaos, killing it with one blow. The girl who’d screamed stood a few feet away, frozen in terror. Her legs gave way, and she landed on her backside, her wide, tearful eyes shifting from the Beast to him.

“P-President—”

“Go! Get a move on already!”

The sight of the normally unflappable student council president shouting at her with a sense of desperate urgency was enough to impress upon her the seriousness of the situation. She quickly picked herself up and ran off in the direction of the shelter. Cain watched her go for a few seconds before he was hit by a severe bout of vertigo that sent him reeling.

“Ugh... Looks like... I’m at my limit...”

Battling Chaos the previous day had drained him. A night’s rest had been moderately restorative, but whatever stamina he’d recovered had been depleted again during his match against Sain. With his legs weak and his head spinning, he pressed his hand to his forehead, trying to steady himself. Then, he saw them — two Beasts approaching him with fangs bared.

Is this it?

The morbid thought flashed across his mind like a large shadow, only for him to quickly realize that it wasn’t just a thought; someone had actually jumped in front of him.

“Emilia?!”

She stood with her back to him, purple hair still fluttering from the motion, and spread out her hands as if shielding him from the Beasts.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing? Get out of here!”

“No!” Emilia exclaimed, her voice firm but her shoulders trembling. “I’m... I’m going to protect you!”

And that was when it hit him like a bolt of lightning in his mind. Suddenly, he understood what Sain had been worried about. The future he’d been cautioned against was now very clear, and very real.

“Picture yourself in a situation where you do lose. Isn’t there someone who might jump in? Someone who might place themselves in harm’s way to protect you?”

He mouthed his answer to Sain’s question.

Emilia.

It was so obvious. He should have known. But it was too late; fear had become truth. The memory of his sister, arms spread out exactly as Emilia’s were now, consumed everything else in his mind. Emotions rolled through him, revived from the grave of remembrance. Regret. Fury. Sorrow. And hatred. His life was replaying itself, and his heart shuddered with wordless agony at the implication.



He couldn't. It was too much. That was a torment he couldn't endure again. And as the Beasts closed in, he was stricken with regret at his own folly. He'd fancied himself a protector, and it had blinded him to the truth. Sain was right. His inability to imagine a future where he might taste defeat led to a failure to envision himself in the position of the protected.

Protector and protected. The roles were fluid; they were exclusive to no one. If only, he thought as guilt consumed him, he'd realized sooner.

"Siem Saevae, here I bear the attendant's mark. Second gift — Holy Sinking Blade."

Daggers of light in hand, Melia's form blurred through the Beasts. Cain watched in stunned silence as the threat of certain death fell to the ground as two heaps of broken meat. She put her hands on her waist, let out a quick sigh, and quipped, "Close one, huh?"

Cain felt himself gnashing his teeth. He set his jaw, looked her straight in the face, and said, "Take me to your master."

Sain, who had been fighting Chaos outside the school grounds, rushed back as soon as he noticed the barrier had been breached.

"Holy Beast."

As soon as he spoke the words, a lion appeared enveloped in an aura of light. It was an ally of his, and he'd placed it on standby the day before the entrance ceremony in case of emergencies like this. The beast lowered its head to him, and he gave it a rub, which drew a contented purr.

"Can you help me get rid of the Beasts of Chaos around here?"

It let out an affirmative growl and leapt into action. There were some Incarnations of Chaos in the attacking party as well, but with their current powers, Alicia and Melia should make short work of them. Stragglers could be left to the holy beast, which was already doing a good job of tearing them apart.

"It looks like everyone's sticking to the plan..."

Sain stood in the center of the field. A Beast attempted to pounce on him, only to be thwarted by a missile of light. Fissures then appeared in the ground underfoot, and blood-red arms reached up from the cracks. He jumped into the air in response, ever vigilant of the fact that Beasts of Chaos had no defined template and could take on all sorts of forms.

"Sanctuary."

He imbued the space around him with the blessing of the goddess, repelling the underground attacker. With no additional threats in sight, he turned his senses in Marni's direction. She seemed safe for the time being. Perhaps the Clan of Chaos was waiting for the Founder to finish its rampage before commencing their operation. He'd thought they would use the Founder as a distraction while infiltrating the school at the same time, but it occurred to him that trying to steal the titan's staff while the Founder was still thrashing around was actually a pretty risky idea. In any case, he needed Marni to hold her position. With evacuations of outside guests still underway, he'd appreciate some reinforcements, but it would have to come from someone else. That was when, as if on cue...

"Sain Fostess!"

He heard a familiar voice behind him and spun around. Cain was in far worse shape than he'd been in at the infirmary. He must have run into some Chaos while directing the evacuation. Beside him stood Melia, who must have led him here.

"You... Make me your attendant."

The steely resolve in Cain's voice took Sain by surprise. Sain regarded him for a while. Then, he flashed a toothy grin.

"No regrets?"

"Plenty... But I'm going to make these my last."

Whatever happened during their brief separation had transformed Cain. The uncertainty that had marred his gaze in the infirmary was nowhere to be found.

"Cain Theresia!"

By speaking his name, a contract was established between the holy knight and his new attendant. The power conferred upon Sain by the goddess began its secondary transfer into Cain.

"What the— No way!"

As soon as the link was made, Sain gasped in awe at Cain's enormous capacity as a human vessel. His affinity for the goddess's power was extremely high, entirely dwarfing that of Alicia's and Melia's.

"It's... still going?!"

"No way!"

Even the goddess herself was amazed by the sheer amount of power flowing into Cain. He'd already taken in two attendants' worth, yet still seemed capable of accepting more.

“So this... is the power of the holy knight,” said Cain as he gazed at his own hands.

“Do you feel any discomfort?”

“No. Not even a hint... It feels like it’s been mine all along.”

Normally, such a sensation shouldn’t have been possible. Even now, unleashing their attendant powers wasn’t a completely painless process for Alicia and Melia; some part of their body would always make its displeasure known. Cain’s body, despite it being his first time, was taking to the power with incredible ease. It was a display of his potential, signaling that Cain Theresia was truly a gifted individual; he had what it took to wield the power of the goddess.

“Ray Javelin.”

He cast the spell at an oncoming Beast. It was the same spell as the one he’d used during the match, only it was now four to five times larger in size. The now-truly-colossal spear hurtled toward the creature in a straight line, punched through it, and wiped out all the other Beasts nearby with its explosion.

“Holy—”

“...Wow.”

Sain stared agape as the violent gusts from the blast sent his hair fluttering wildly.

“He’s... the strongest attendant. There’s no question.”

It was an incredibly invigorating sight to behold. At the same time, it made him think about the future.

I might have just found a successor.

When he eventually decided to retire, he might be able to pass the power of the holy knight to Cain. His excitement at the discovery of a new, promising attendant, however, was put on hold by the appearance of a gigantic monster in the distance.

“Here it comes,” he growled. “The Founder...”

The towering form of a blood-red crab emerged from a cloud of dust. Granted, “crab” was only an approximation of its shape. It had eight legs, two of which were pincers that evoked the comparison. The rest of it was nothing close. A pair of horns grew from its head, longer and sharper than its pincers, giving it a thoroughly menacing aura.

“Kessen Rukai... The Stainless Hermit,” said Sain, recognizing the creature.

“Fate loves its ironies, doesn’t it,” spat Cain. “Who would have thought we’d meet again like this.”

Having peered into the previous holy knight’s memories through the goddess, Sain knew what Cain meant.

This was the Founder that killed Cain’s sister.

How ironic indeed, Sain thought, that it would show up now of all times. He took a moment to think, recalling everything he knew about the characteristics of Kessen Rukai. Then, he turned to Melia.

“Melia, go help Alicia. The students are still in the middle of evacuating.”

“It’s a Founder you’re up against, you know? Are you sure you don’t need more firepower here?”

“Saving lives comes first. Also, this Founder isn’t the type who’s easier to beat with more people.”

She took him at his word and ran off without any further questions. Once she was gone, Sain and Cain glanced at each other before bursting into action at the same time.

“Ray Javelin. ”

Cain’s supersized spear slammed into the equally massive crab. Meanwhile, Sain slid past its feet and swung his golden blade at its underbelly. A single sweep of his sword was enough to part most Chaos in two, but Founders — the very first generation of Chaos — were not like the rest, and he felt the dull impact of his blade being stopped by the creature’s mighty carapace.

“■■■■■■■■!”

The Founder roared in its unearthly voice, forcing both of them to shield their ears and back away. It swung its two great pincers down at the ground, breaking up a large stretch of the school field. Sain carefully evaded the deadly shards of earth and rock that flew at him before climbing onto an upraised piece of the ground.

“Cain! Are you okay?!”

“For now, at least. But it doesn’t look like we can afford to take even a single hit...”

In the blink of an eye, the Founder had changed the very terrain they stood on. A gaping crevice now spanned the length of the field, reaching from one end of the school building to the other. Another one of those, and the building itself might become the crevice.

Cain, unintimidated by the casual display of widespread destruction, shot the monster a fierce glare and thrust his arm out at it.

“Great torrent of light, blind the land with an argent sea — Velle Vright! ”

A wave of light rushed toward the Founder, vaporizing the debris littering the ground in the process. It was a clever move, ridding the field of obstacles while simultaneously functioning as an attack. With his way cleared, Sain tightened his grip on his sword and dashed forward again... only to stop in his tracks when the monster discharged a massive amount of bubbles from its mouth.

“Those bubbles! They’re—”

Countless transparent orbs filled the air, each one large enough to hold an entire person.

“Sain!”

“I know!”

Sain quickly retreated. Cain’s torrent of light smashed into the wall of bubbles, bounced off them, and rushed back toward the two of them.

“Ugh!”

Sain leapt into the air, allowing the torrent to pass below. Cain followed suit. They watched as his spell wreaked further havoc on the field before fading away near the school building. Sain landed on the uneven ground and glared at the bubbles floating around the Founder.

“So this is what it looks like in action... The ability to reflect magic.”

Each Founder had a unique ability that none of the others possessed. One turtle-shaped Founder could cause the disintegration of anything it touched. Another monkey-like Founder could freely control its subordinates. Yet another shaped like a fish could turn invisible at will. Kessen Rukai’s unique trait was the ability to reflect all forms of magic.

“Sain, can’t you seal this Founder like your predecessor did?”

Having immediately recognized the threat posed by this Founder, Cain started searching for ways to end the fight quickly.

“...No.” Sain grimaced. “Preparations are necessary for that kind of seal, and it takes a lot of time.”

When Sain inherited the power of the holy knight, he also gained knowledge pertaining to the Founders and how to seal them. Therefore, he could say with certainty that sealing the Founder right now was an impossible task.

“We’ll have to defeat it ourselves.”

The statement was meant for himself as much as Cain. There existed seven Founders in the world, and not a single one had ever been defeated by the previous holy knights and dark knights. Consequently, they chose to seal the Founders away. Now, with the seal broken and no time to prepare another one, there was only one choice left. The two of them would have to make history and defeat it in combat.

“Lighto.”

Sain shot off a light bullet. He’d held back considerably, keeping it to the size of a fist. The bullet flew toward the Founder, hit one of the bubbles in the way, and bounced back at him. He swatted it away with his sword.

“It’s almost a perfect rebound, isn’t it? It’d be fine if we could somehow absorb the ones that come back at us...” mused Sain.

“But if we start dodging them, they’ll cause even more damage everywhere,” said Cain, finishing Sain’s thought.

The goddess’s power was more or less inexhaustible. Even if the battle dragged on, they didn’t need to worry about running out. The problem was that a lengthy confrontation would result in considerable damage to their surroundings. Before they could formulate an effective plan, however, the Founder went on the offensive. It pointed one of its pincers at Sain. Magical energy gathered at the center of the pincer at an alarming rate.

“Watch out!”

The pincer became a cannon, letting loose a blast of blood-red energy. Sain quickly held up his golden sword like a shield and dug his feet in. The front of the blast splintered against the sword, sending stray fragments everywhere. A shockwave rolled through the ground, causing violent and destructive quakes that threatened to throw him off balance. He clenched his teeth and kept pushing against the blast.

“Hnngh! Damn... it!”

Even with the full might of the holy knight’s power, he couldn’t cancel out the tremendous amount of energy slamming into him. The force was so great that it began to flay his skin, leaving bloody streaks across his arms and face.

“Ray Javelin!”

Cain joined in, trying to stop the blast by launching his massive spear at it, only for a bubble to repel the attempt. The reflected spear flew past Cain, nearly grazing his side, and bore a large hole in the school building.

Eventually, the blast waned, and Sain let out a pained gasp.

“Sain, are you okay?”

“Yeah. That... was one hell of an attack. On top of that, none of our spells can reach it,” said Sain as he glared resentfully at the Founder.

Just then, the bubble that had reflected the javelin burst with a loud pop.

“I see. We can break those bubbles if we hit them with a strong spell,” said Cain. “But they’re still going to reflect whatever we throw at them at least once. It looks like the bubbles are finite, but if we try to break all of them like this, we’ll end up leveling the whole academy.”

Sain nodded. Even if he only counted the bubbles immediately in front of them, there were at least twenty. Breaking all of them with Cain’s *Ray Javelin* would mean subjecting the surroundings to the ricocheted destruction of over twenty of those massive spears. And that was when an idea came to him.

“Cain, can you take in a little more of my power?”

“...No problem. But what are you trying to do?”

Cain’s question was met with a toothy grin.

“The same thing I did during our match.”

Sain turned to the goddess.

“Goddess, move all of my power to Cain.”

“*Huh? B-But, if I do that, you’ll be—*”

“It’s fine! Just do it! Hurry!”

Magical energy was gathering in the Founder’s pincer again. The goddess, realizing that time was short, obeyed and began transferring the entirety of the holy knight’s vast power to Cain.

“Ugh! Th-This is...”

“Can you handle it?”

“You... bet I can!”

He answered in groans, but he stood his ground. The amount of power flooding into him had far surpassed conventional limits. Had this been Melia or Alicia, they would have surpassed their capacity long ago. Cain’s extraordinary affinity for the goddess’s power, however, allowed him to tolerate the process.

You are a marvel, thought Sain. If he was the most capable wielder of the goddess’s power in the world, then Cain was surely the second best. No one else would come close.

As the holy knight's power drained from Sain's body, the sword in his hand lost its golden glow and reverted to its normal black hue.

"With that, I've temporarily lost my holy knight power. But in exchange..."

He produced a bolt of *Darku* in his palm with an ease he'd never before displayed. The spell's activation was incredibly stable.

"So that's your plan... You've sure got some nerve."

"Not as much as you."

They traded a knowing smile. Then, Cain spun toward the Founder with his palm out.

"Ray Javelin!"

He launched another massive spear at it. Like before, it hit a bubble and reversed course. The bubble popped, but the glowing spear kept coming.

"Dark Ray!"

Sain pierced the reflected spear with his own dark lance. The two spells canceled each other on impact and vanished.

"Hit 'em with all you've got!" shouted Sain. "Go nuts! I'll catch everything that comes back!"

"Now we're talking!"

Being opposites, light and dark magic canceled each other out. Just like how Sain had negated Cain's magic during their match, all he had to do was repeat the same process. Cain would hurl spells at the Founder. They would get reflected. Sain would then proceed to cancel them out and minimize collateral damage.

"Orb of radiance, bathe all in blinding light — Vright."

An enormous ball of light flew toward the Founder. As it rebounded against a bubble, Sain cast his own spell.

"Orb of gloom, devour with shadow and darkness — Dardia!"

The pair of elementally opposed orbs collided and disintegrated together. Though no damage was done, the reflection of Cain's spell consumed another bubble. If they kept this up, sooner or later, their attacks would reach the Founder itself.

I'm sorry to admit this, Goddess, mused Sain as he shot down spell after reflected spell, but dark magic has never been so easy to use! This is amazing!

Without the power of the holy knight, Sain's command of dark magic reached unprecedented heights. The holy presence had made him naturally

light-oriented, creating an innate incompatibility with darkness that severely hampered his ability to learn dark magic. With the offending power completely transferred to Cain, Sain's affinity for light vanished, leaving him empty — save for the fruits of his hard work and perseverance.

“Flash like serpent's fangs — Lighto Whip! ”

A gigantic whip appeared above Sain. The intensity of its glow made Sain squint. Then, another one appeared, followed by more until five radiant whips hovered in the air, each as thick as the trunk of a large tree. They lashed out at once, striking at the bubble barrier like the massive fingers of a beast of pure light. A swath of bubbles ruptured immediately, and the glowing tendrils reversed their course.

“Great torrent of darkness, drown the land in seas of black— ”

Sain spoke the incantation of a spell he'd never been able to use before. Now, he knew he could. Dark energy gathered before him.

“Velle Darku! ”

A wave of pure darkness swallowed the reflected whips. There were only three bubbles left.

“Watch out! It's doing the cannon thing again!” yelled Sain.

The Founder's pincer opened and fired off a beam of blood-red energy at Cain, who stood his ground and closed his eyes.

“Fohrs Saeva, here I bear the attendant's mark— ”

Particles of light coalesced around his form.

“Eighth gift — Holy Guiding Sword! ”

A sword of golden glory materialized in his hand. He swung it, and the radiant crescent erased the oncoming blast. Without pause, he slashed three more times, sending out arcs of light that burst the remaining bubbles. Three *Dardias* from Sain in quick succession extinguished them on their return.

“We're through!”

With all the bubbles destroyed, the Founder was laid bare. The two of them moved in wordless unison, rushing up to the monster and thrusting their arms out at it.

“Ray Javelin! ”

“Dark Ray! ”

Putting all their power into a simultaneous final strike, they sent two deadly spells hurtling at the Founder. One, an explosive spear of light, massive and bright. The other, a perforating lance of darkness. thin and

swift. The two ethereal weapons slammed into the Founder... and punched a gaping hole straight through its thick body. The giant monster shuddered, sending quakes through the ground. Then, slowly, it began to disintegrate from outside in, its enormous form flaking away into blood-red particles that faded into the air.

Finally, it was gone. Kessen Rukai, the Stainless Hermit, had been annihilated.

“N-No way... You beat... a Founder?”

The goddess gaped at them. Her lips quivered in astonishment. Then, she burst into loud and emphatic cheers.

“You did it! Sain dear! You really did it! Oh my gosh, this is a historic achievement! No one has *ever* been able to defeat one of them before!”

“Yeah... I’m still trying to process that fact too,” Sain murmured in a daze.

It took Cain falling to his knees to snap him back to attention.

“Sorry... I’m at my limit,” he said through gritted teeth. “Can you hurry up and take back your power?”

“R-Right, of course.”

Sain reclaimed the goddess’s power, thereby inactivating Cain’s attendant state. As soon as he did, Cain broke out in a profuse sweat and trembled visibly. It was the goddess’s power that had kept him going all this time. Without it, the fatigue from the match came rushing back to him. On top of that, there were the inevitable repercussions of gaining and then losing so much power so quickly.

“Damn. This holy knight’s power... has got one hell of a kick to it. I won’t even be standing on my own legs for a while, never mind working. And you just walk around with this thing in you like it’s nothing?”

“My compatibility with the goddess is apparently really high. I mean, that’s pretty much a prerequisite for being chosen as a holy knight.”

“I see. I guess... I’ll never be one then.”

“That’s—”

Not true.

He kept the last two words unsaid, as the goddess gave him a death glare. It seemed like the right thing to do. In his head, however, he continued to mull over the idea that had occurred to him during the battle. While Cain’s incredible affinity for the goddess’s power certainly made him a suitable successor, Sain wasn’t about to call it quits just yet. After all, Sain

wasn't called "the strongest holy knight in history" for nothing; when it came to affinity, he was still superior. So long as Sain could still pull his weight in battle, it was probably fine to leave Cain as an attendant.

"Hm?"

As the last trickle of the goddess's power flowed out of Cain and back into him, he frowned. For some reason, it felt different — the power seemed stronger than before. He shrugged. Maybe his mind was playing tricks on him. It *had* been a long day. Besides, even if it had grown stronger somehow, that hardly seemed like a problem.

Just then, he noticed the ragged figures of Melia, Marni, and Alicia approaching, and he entertained the thought no longer.



Epilogue

The defeat of the Founder likely came as a surprise to Chaos, and their onslaught ceased soon after. As it turned out, their objective had indeed been the anchor of the academy's barrier — the titan's staff. While Sain and Cain were battling the Founder, Melia and Alicia rendezvoused with Marni, who was trying to fend off the Clan of Chaos. Together, the girls kept the would-be thieves at bay until the Founder fell, after which the clan retreated as well.

The next day, the academy put out an announcement saying it had been attacked by a new monster species, and all students and staff were to immediately begin taking part in the restoration effort.

"Oh gee— My back!"

Sain froze in the middle of lifting a particularly large chunk of debris. He then slowly bent his legs, placed the debris back on the ground, and gingerly nursed his lumbar region. The match with Cain had taken a serious toll on his body, and the fight against the Founder was worse. His decision to push himself and endure two intense battles back-to-back was now coming back to bite him. He was really in no shape to be doing construction work.

"Careful now, Master Sain. The elderly shouldn't be doing too much heavy lifting."

"...In case you've forgotten how time works, if I'm elderly, then you're no spring chicken either."

"Says you. Take that."

She poked him in the back and he yelped.

"Yeeeow!"

She got him right where it hurts. His reaction amused her, and she poked him a few more times.

"Take that and that."

"Ow! Ow! Ow!"

"Would the two of you quit playing around?" said an exasperated Alicia before she looked around and frowned. "Wait, where's Marni?"

“Miss Grim? She’s taking a break over there,” he said, pointing with one hand while trying to fend off Melia’s digital assaults with the other.

Alicia glanced in the direction he indicated to find Marni sprawled under some trees, looking like she was about to pass out any second.

“...That girl needs to exercise more.”

Unlike the field exercises, during which they’d scheduled frequent breaks to pace themselves, they’d been working nonstop today since the morning, and it had all been manual labor. Therefore, she wasn’t particularly surprised that Marni had tapped out so quickly, but it was still a pitiful sight to behold.

“Sain.”

Hearing someone call his name, Sain turned to find Cain and Emilia approaching him.

“Hey. You’re, uh... on your feet.”

“Just barely. But work calls. And there’s a whole mountain of it already. I can’t afford to be out of commission.”

The student council was currently dealing with the task of post-battle expo clean up, which Cain was in charge of. The aftereffects of using the holy knight’s power undoubtedly still lingered, but he made no show of it. Through sheer force of will, he presented the familiar image of the steadfast student council president who continued to act as an exemplar of calm, sensible behavior for his peers. There was a tangible unease in the air as students walked through the ravaged school, and Cain’s unchanging attitude provided them with a calming sense of normalcy.

“Right. So, about the fact that you’ve become my attendant—”

“That’s exactly what I’m here to talk to you about. It’s true that I’m now your attendant. However, I’m also aware that the holy knight is far from omnipotent. Therefore... I will not be following your lead.” He looked Sain straight in the eyes and continued, “If we both face the same direction and walk the same way, we’ll simply fall for the same traps. To that end, you’re going to need an attendant who’s looking in a different direction.”

“But there’s only so much you can do against Chaos on your own—”

“Relax.” Cain showed him a reassuring smile. “I already have somebody to watch my back.”

Emilia, standing a few paces behind Cain, acknowledged this with a polite bow of her head.

Ah , thought Sain. So that’s who he means.

They made a good pair. A skilled lightkind or darkkind, even if they weren't an attendant of the holy knight, would be a valuable ally. After all, Sain himself often relied on Marni's help, and she wasn't an attendant.

"I see. In that case, I guess you're fine."

That was apparently all Cain wanted to say, as he proceeded to turn around and walk away. Emilia followed him, taking a few quick steps forward to catch him when he swayed a little and risked stumbling. From there, she continued to walk wordlessly alongside him, keeping an arm on him to keep him from falling. Sain watched the pair with a smile. The bond between those two was strong — stronger than ever — and he had no doubt that whatever new challenges came their way, they'd overcome it together.

"Speaking of which, Master Sain, are you sure *you* should be standing on your own two feet?" asked Melia.

Her question wasn't entirely facetious; the events of the previous day should have been equally exhausting for him.

"You bring up a good point. But actually... ever since I fought the Founder yesterday, I've been feeling great, and I haven't the slightest clue why."

The phenomenon had perplexed him this whole time. He certainly wasn't back up to one hundred percent, but his stamina was clearly recovering more quickly than he was used to. Energy permeated his body in a way he'd never experienced before, and he felt like he had enough juice in him to go another round in the tournament.

"Goddess, something about my body doesn't feel right, and it's been like this since yesterday. Do you know what's going on?"

The cause of the anomaly was clearly the battle against the Founder. Since he'd been using the power of the holy knight during the fight, he figured the goddess might know something.

"I think it's because you've gotten stronger as the holy knight, Sain dear."

"...What?"

He frowned. What she said made no sense to him.

"You probably never noticed, but when the holy knight makes an attendant, a bond is formed between the two of them. That bond allows both the holy knight and the attendant to share all sorts of powers, so when someone strong becomes your attendant, your powers grow as well."

"O-Oh. Is that how it works?"

“Only a little bit, though. The effect is pretty weak. But I think because Cain Theresia has such an incredible amount of natural talent, the increase in power from making him your attendant is actually perceptible and you can feel it in your body.”

Sain nodded. Basically, by making Cain his attendant, he'd grown stronger as well.

“...Hm? Wait a minute.” A worrying thought occurred to him, and he broke out in a cold sweat. His voice started to tremble. “Y-You said I've gotten stronger as the holy knight, right? I-Is that going to... affect my ability to learn dark magic?”

The goddess beamed at him.

“It'll be fine! You're the holy knight, so everything will be A-OK!”

“Answer my question, damn it! Auuugh, whatever! I knew it! It's going to affect it! It's going to make things so much harder!”

“I guess this means you're just not cut out to be the dark knight!”

“Gyaaaaaah! Why?! This is the worst!”

The stronger he grew as the holy knight, the further away he got from becoming the dark knight. That explained why he was feeling so good. Light magical energy was leaking out of him. Previously, the seals had been enough to keep it under control, but making Cain an attendant had supercharged his power, pushing it past the limit of their suppressive abilities.

“Now, now, let's take a deep breath and calm down,” said Melia. “It's not like you're on a deadline, so just take your time to figure it out.”

“W-Well, sure, but...”

He sighed. He'd ended up further away from becoming the dark knight, but in exchange, he'd found a potential successor in Cain. That made it easier to stomach. Besides, it wasn't like all his hard work had gone to waste. This was just another challenge he'd have to overcome. No matter how many times he stumbled, so long as he continued to pick himself up, he'd be fine. And if his strength ever failed him... he was fortunate enough to have a group of irreplaceable friends who would help him to his feet.

“Plus, I'll always be here for you,” she added. “We'll manage. Together.”

“...Fair enough. I'll be counting on your help then, Maid.”

In response, she beamed.

Afterword

Hello again. It's been a while.

I highly doubt there's anyone who started this series from the third volume, but just in case it's your first time... Hi. Nice to meet you. I'm Yusaku Sakaishi.

When you spend all day at home doing nothing but writing novels, you tend to have a severe lack of content for afterwords like these. I have no idea what I should write. Also, I remember having the exact same problem for volume two.

From the publication of volume two to now, nothing worth mentioning has happened in my private life, so I guess I'll mention a few things about the content of volume three. This story puts the spotlight on one of the heroines, Melia, as it touches on her past and pits her against the rival character Cain in an intense battle. This is a scene that I've been wanting to write ever since I started this series, so the writing process for this part of the story went pretty smoothly. I feel like the more volumes I write, the easier it gets for me. It's probably different from person to person, but that seems to be the kind of writer I am.

This volume was also sort of an experiment for me, in that I approached it with a slightly differently mentality than before. The idea came to me after reading the reviews of this series. As I went through them, I found that people enjoyed the comedic parts more than I'd expected. To be honest, I've never been very confident in my ability to write comedy, and whenever I had to trim my stories down to fit a page limit, the comedy scenes were always the first to go.

If I had to describe myself as a writer, I'd say I'm the type who constructs his stories logically. When seen from the perspective of someone like me, it's hard to point at comedy scenes and argue for their necessity. Until recently, I only ever saw them as parts whose function was to vary the pacing by providing slower sections to complement faster ones. It's the fast parts that are important to a story, and slow parts should be kept to a bare minimum. That's what I thought. However, I might have been wrong.

Recently, after reflecting on the opinions of various readers, I've started to think, "Maybe fleshing out the comedy parts a little more will better satisfy reader expectations."

So, I approached volume three by having each character follow their inherent motivations and move freely. I'm not sure if this is a good thing (I think it's not), but I've always had the tendency to run into the situation where my characters start moving around on their own, forcing me to use all sorts of methods to keep them under control. For volume three though, I decided to loosen my grip on the reins a little. As a result... well, my characters had a field day. Like a bunch of crazy idiots, they just did their thing, which made for a lot of comedy scenes that weren't at all in the original plot.

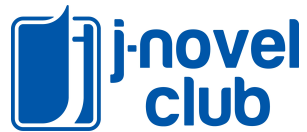
By slightly letting go of something I've always kept a tight grasp on, it also made it easier for me from a psychological perspective. Like, thanks to that, I started thinking, "Well, if it looks like I might end up short a few pages, I'll just pad it out with comedy." I don't know if this is lazy writing or strategic writing, but the circuitry in my head is definitely taking on a new shape. Is this really okay? Like... seriously?

Overall, I feel that I managed to write in all the content I wanted to include in the third volume. Not only was I able to write about the romcom surrounding Sain, I also got to delve into his exciting battle against his rival Cain, so I'm pretty satisfied. I love these kinds of battles where each side is putting their beliefs and ideals on the line. It is my earnest wish that I will be able to convey this love of mine to the readers and share this sense of satisfaction. As an author, that would be a great blessing.

I think that will do for this time. I hope to see you again.

Special Thanks

In writing this work, I received generous help from my editors, proofreaders, and a number of other individuals involved in its creation. Thank you for your contributions. I am once again deeply grateful for Heiro's beautiful illustrations (Marni was especially adorable). Finally, to everyone who took this book in your hands, you have my endless gratitude.



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The Holy Knight's Dark Road: Volume 3
by Yusaku Sakaishi

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Original Japanese edition published in 2020 by Hobby Japan
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Ebook edition 1.0: September 2020